

VI

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LTINA

the Sword Princess

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“Regis...”

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

“Me!? Err...
The commander
I serve?”

“Who is
she to you?”

Seaside Lass
Narissa

“Fufufu...
If the princess
were to see us now,
do you think she’d
misunderstand?”

“Misunderstand
what?”

At that, Clarisse placed a hand over Regis’s eyes.
Her touch was soft, pleasantly cool,
and carried a gentle fragrance.

“Very well, then.
I’ll read to you.
That should at least
give your body and
eyes some rest.”

Whimsical Maid
Clarisse





“Aren’t
we going
to get hit
like this?”

“...Most
likely.”

“Admiral,
the enemy turns
starboard!”

No sooner had Regis muttered
than the enemy ships’ port sides
were swallowed in black smoke.





Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is.

She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

A maid six years older than Altina who has been by the princess's side for as long as she can remember. Altina trusts her from the depths of her heart. While Clarisse is usually silent like a doll, she tends to joke incessantly with anyone she's taken a liking to.

Regis Aurick



Fifth-grade administrative officer.

A bibliophage who dreamed of becoming a librarian in the military library. He was an abject failure in the military academy, unable to swing a sword, draw a bow, or even ride a horse. The abundance of knowledge he has obtained from his books does give him some talent as a tactician, however.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

First-grade combat officer. The new head of the House of Balzac, famous for its outstanding swordsmanship. Despite having inherited his house's aptitude for swordplay, Eddie has never cut down a person on the battlefield. The sword he carries, the Défendre Sept, has been passed down in his family since the days of the first emperor.

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgarian Empire. When the real Auguste was assassinated, his younger sister Felicia stood in and assumed his identity. As of now, she has abandoned her claim to the throne and is living in Fort Volks with Eddie.





Eric Mickaël de Blanchard

A Belgian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénézay's army, he was deeply impressed by Regis's command, and personally volunteered to be sent to the front lines to chase after the man he respected so much.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt



Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He would spend his days as the de facto commander of Fort Sierck drinking and gambling, but he surrendered this position when Altina bested him in a duel.





Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Detesting the very notion of getting involved in power struggles, he left Belgaria to study in High Britannia. Frustrated that his siblings were being handed treasured swords left and right, he may or may not have secretly made off with the Vite Espace Trois.

Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Second prince of the Belgarian Empire. The son of the queen, he possesses talent in both military and civil affairs. While officially serving as the commander of the First Army, he has seized control over the entire imperial army in the stead of his elderly father and the sickly first prince.

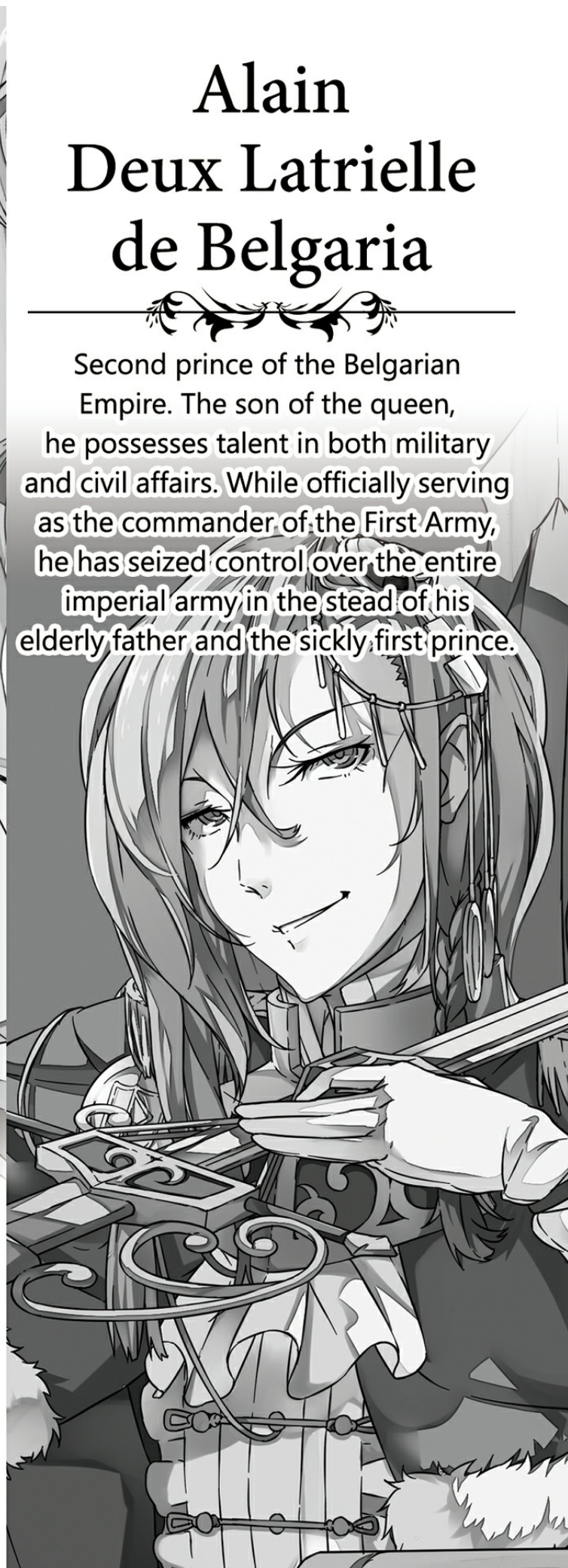




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The story so far—

Inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves, Regis Aurick is a hopeless soldier who spends his days buried in books.

The year is 850 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

Having been banished to Fort Sierck on the northern front, he was approached by the tenacious Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—“Altina” for short—a stunning young woman whose imperial lineage was denoted by her crimson hair and red eyes. The daughter of a commoner, she was shunned by the queen and other high nobles, eventually being appointed commander of a faraway border regiment at the unprepared age of fourteen.

Under normal circumstances, her time would have been spent idly, the empty title making her little more than a decoration. But the impassioned princess, having spent her adolescence caught between internal struggles for power, aspires for something greater. She has seen the strife caused by self-seeking nobles—the ruthless taxation and pointless wars—and so resolves to change the country!

“I’m going to become empress. I need your wisdom.”

Altina soon proves her mettle as a commander, and while Regis feels no more confident in his own abilities, he swears to work as her tactician.

And so the year turns to 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

Come February, Altina receives an unreasonable request from the commander of the Belgarian military—her brother, Second Prince Latrielle:

You are to capture Fort Volks in the Grand Duchy of Varden of the Germania Federation.

The fortress is notorious for being impregnable, so it would be simply absurd for a small force on the border to attempt an attack. However, Regis recalls an

old military strategy he once read about in a book, and while not without casualties, the border regiment successfully captures Fort Volks under Altina's command.

At the beginning of April, Altina makes her return to the imperial palace of La Branne. She is accompanied by Regis, who is nervous but also excited to witness the place where many a tale has been set.

But this was hardly the time to enjoy the sights and celebrations: both the first and second princes of the Empire are plotting to take the throne. Altina is fourth in line, meaning she cannot become empress without overcoming them both.

Regis is initially overwhelmed. That is, until he sees through both princes' ploys and cleverly uses them to his advantage. He ultimately secures the cooperation of rising noble Elenore, while First Prince Auguste—or at least, who everyone believes to be Auguste—rescinds his right as next in line to the throne, expressing his desire for Altina to take his place. As a result, Altina is finally established as a prominent candidate to become empress.

On April 23rd, High Britannia, the nation that has exhibited the greatest advancements in industrial technology, issues a declaration of war. The death of their previous queen has allowed the war-supporting Margaret to take the throne, and thanks to High Britannia's steam engine and the newly developed cannons in their arsenal, they are able to one-sidedly pulverize any ship Belgaria sends their way.

Appearing to have colluded with High Britannia, the Grand Duchy of Varden chooses this opportunity to launch an attack on Fort Volks. Regis's scheme sends them running in a single night, but an archer in the famous mercenary brigade Renard Pendu manages to shoot down the young knight Eric, while Altina's treasured blade—the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*—is broken in combat.

Despite these developments, the border regiment is forced to march west to answer a call for reinforcements. Regis's elder sister makes an appearance along the way, and they entrust the broken sword to her husband (and Regis's

brother-in-law) Enzo for repairs.

On May 19th, the Battle of La Frenge takes place. Led by Barguesonne, a lieutenant general valuing tradition above all else, the Empire's Seventh Army forms a closely-knit formation and charges their foe. However, when pitted against High Britannia's newest firearms, the Belgarian Army's attack leads only to catastrophic losses. In the end, the lieutenant general dies in battle, along with half of his troops.

There is no possible way to defeat such weapons—that is what the remnants of the Seventh Army believe, having completely lost the will to go on. And it is to these disheartened men that Regis makes a proposition.

“We should just give up fighting them on land, and attack from the sea instead. High Britannia won't be able to receive supplies if they don't have any transport ships.”

Chapter 1: On Le Lucé

Imperial Year 851, May 22nd—

It was a day later than scheduled when the First Army arrived for the rendezvous. They were currently stationed atop Le Lucé—a hill covered in low, verdant grass that served as an excellent vantage point—where they had set up a tent for the express purpose of a conference.

Despite it being midday, the heavy clouds looming overhead made everything dim and gloomy. A fierce wind accompanied them, and every now and again a sudden gust would noisily rustle the grass underfoot. It wasn't quite as bad as it would have been down on the plains below, but it was still strong enough to blow one's hair about.

A black-haired young man—Fifth-Grade Admin Officer Regis Aurick—brushed his bangs away from his eyes, when all of a sudden, his gaze turned to the girl standing beside him. She was accompanying him on his trek up the hill, and her visage was so breathtaking that it was practically a fine work of art. Even under gray, cloudy skies, her hair boasted a fiery red luster.

As her pale, slender fingers swept back her hair, a few silky red strands tickled Regis's nose. She was returning his gaze, her crimson eyes looking straight into his.

This girl, whose red hair and crimson eyes served as proof of her Belgian royal lineage, was Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. She was a princess of the Empire who, under normal circumstances, would never be walking side by side with a commoner such as Regis—even with him being her tactician.

But that wasn't the only oddity in their relationship—whenever they were alone or in the presence of a select few, Regis would drop the formalities expected of one addressing a royal and call her by the nickname “Altina.” And when he showed even the slightest trace of reservation around her, the prone-to-emotion princess wouldn't even try to hide her discontentment.

She never seems to get angry about it, though. In fact, I think it makes her sad more than anything else... Regis thought, though he wasn't sure whether he was just overthinking things.

Altina parted her pale lips to speak. "Oh, sorry. Is my hair getting in your face?"

"...No, not at all."

"Really? Hey, you're spacing out a little. You're not feeling unwell, are you?"

She reached her hand out to touch Regis's forehead, and he inadvertently moved a step back. "I'm perfectly fine," he replied tersely. There was no possible way he could admit that he had actually been enchanted by her beauty, and in an attempt to hide his growing shame, Regis wiped away a layer of sweat he hadn't even shed.



“I hope that’s true... It’s been one bad thing after another. Please, don’t overdo it.”

It was as Altina said: following their engagement with Varden, the Beilschmidt border regiment had marched for twenty days only to fight a losing battle the day before last. If there was any consolation, the regiment itself hadn’t experienced any major losses, and neither she nor Regis had been injured. But there was no doubting that they were both worn down.

“...If I’m tired, then I can’t imagine how bad you and the soldiers must have it,” Regis said. He had made the twenty-day journey by carriage, and had even been given his own provisional office. He did not have to worry about lugging around a sword or spear, nor had he directly taken part in the battle.

Altina shrugged. “The soldiers and I, well... we’re trained for this. A lot better trained than you are, at least. That’s why you’re my biggest concern.”

“I see... I have no rebuttal.”

The princess teasingly poked out her tongue in response. “Eheheh... I beat Regis in an argument. Maybe I’ve got what it takes to be a tactician.”

“That would be wonderful. Now if you could just take over some of my work, I’ll have more time to read.”

“Ha, I’m only joking.”

“What a shame... Well, I suppose I have no other choice, then—I’ll have to cut down on sleep instead.”

“Err, Regis?”

“I’m only joking.”

“You’d better be... If you don’t get enough sleep, you really will come down with something.”

“I’ve already shaved down my sleep time as much as possible; it quite literally can’t go any lower.”

Altina’s expression turned serious. “Now you listen here, Regis...”

“Don’t worry, I’m at least getting enough sleep to avoid collapsing... I think.”

“Ah, of course! I’m just going to have to start sleeping with you! That way I can be sure you’re in bed at a reasonable time!”

Altina looked rather proud of herself, grinning like she’d just hit on a brilliant idea. Regis could already feel his cheeks heating up, and while it took the princess a little while longer to realize what she had just said, she soon turned red as well.

“No, wait... I didn’t mean it like that, okay!?”

“Right.”

“I’m a splendid adult now! I won’t even sleep in the same room as a man until I’m married!”

“But of course.”

The age of adulthood in Belgaria was fifteen, and just yesterday, Altina had welcomed her fifteenth birthday on the dreary plains of war. Her maid Clarisse had held a modest celebration, and the Black Knight Jerome had prepared some high-class wine as a birthday present. It wasn’t rare to give a person alcohol to celebrate their rise to adulthood. And almost immediately after she’d taken her first sip of alcohol...

Regis shook his head, immediately putting a stop to that derailed train of thought. “Well, whatever the case—I don’t think a man and woman should thoughtlessly sleep in the same room, regardless of age,” he said with a shrug.

“I-I know that already,” Altina replied with a nod, red to her ears.

They were now nearing the tent atop the hill.

“I know these are dark times, but Prince Latrielle is still your rival for the throne,” Regis said. “Take care not to say anything careless.”

“Um, what would count as careless?”

“...I suppose I wouldn’t have needed to warn you if you could make the distinction. In that case, please leave the negotiations to me.”

“Right. That’s probably for the best.”

Knights of the Empire’s First Army patrolled the tent’s perimeter on

horseback, diligently on the lookout. It was only the month before when they had bared their fangs at Altina's regiment, losing almost a third of their brigade to heavy casualties as a result.

Regis didn't think they would seek retribution during such a state of emergency, but he still shivered nervously. Altina, on the other hand, was carrying herself so boldly that her attitude practically screamed, "If you've got a problem, come at me!"

The knights met her with immaculate salutes; their motions were textbook, and they moved in perfect unison. Altina responded with no more than a small nod before walking through, with Regis anxiously trailing behind.



The entrance to the tent was just a dangling sheet of cloth, held down at the bottom with rocks. Altina pushed it aside and marched straight in.

A strong herbal scent drifted through the air inside, and there were around six knights stationed by the walls. First-Grade Admin Officer Germain was standing by a long desk wearing a grave expression. His face made it clear just how fatigued he was. Latrielle was seated beside him, dressed in his military uniform with a bandage wrapped around his head, staring hard at a map that had been spread out over the tabletop. Had he been injured in battle? His complexion didn't look any different than usual: his skin was as pale as plaster, his lips were redder than a ripe tomato, and his face showed not even a hint of weariness.

The prince spoke without even moving his eyes from the map. "I'm glad to see you're in good health, Argentina."



“Likewise. You look surprisingly healthy, Latrielle. I’d heard you were injured.”

“Yes, the enemy got one over on me. They dropped rocks and logs on us from the cliffs above, then their cavalry charged down those very cliffs to attack us.”

“Doesn’t sound like anything special; I remember you used to run down cliffs all the time.”

“That was when I was still a child, youthful and invincible... I never anticipated that they would cut straight to the center of an army thirty-thousand strong, even with the narrow mountain path stretching our formation.”

“Where were you ambushed?” Altina asked.

Germain answered on Latrielle’s behalf, pointing at a spot on the map. “Right here—the narrowest point of a path through the mountains. The enemy attacked from above, then retreated into the valley below once the battle was over.”

“...I see.”

On terrain like that, there was no guaranteeing the safety of the army’s main camp, no matter how many troops they had at their disposal. The ambush appeared to have taken place on a pathway around halfway up the slopes, but the map alone wasn’t enough for them to discern how steep the cliffs around it were.

Regis fell into thought for a moment. *Had they been moving through enemy territory, it would have been careless to discount the possibility of ambushes and traps...* But the First Army had been well within imperial borders, and they were going up against an invading force.

One needed a thorough understanding of the surrounding land before they could competently select spots to lie in ambush, and large-scale traps required considerable preparation. In other words, this attack wasn’t down to the First Army being inept—rather, it was down to their enemy being extremely competent.

Altina pointed at Latrielle’s bandaged head. “We can say the attack was unavoidable. But how did *you* get injured?”

“This wound is from the trident of Mercenary King Gilbert. Just when I thought I had dodged, he caught me with a second strike. That man’s going to be quite troublesome.”

Altina groaned, her eyes fixed on the map. “Mrr... Those Renard Pendu folks really are something...”

“Sounds like you’ve had a run-in with them too.”

“You could say that...” Altina’s expression soured. During their battle against Varden, she had fought a girl named Franziska from the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu. Franziska was a crossbow expert who had managed to both take out Altina’s guard Eric and break the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*.

Latrielle grabbed a piece from the corner of the map and rolled it between his fingers. “What’s become of the Seventh Army?”

“I’m sure you’ve already received the letter, but we lost Lieutenant General Bargesonne, along with the majority of his soldiers.”

The approximately twenty-one thousand soldiers of the Seventh Army had been cut down to a mere ten thousand. This figure accounted for four thousand dead, five thousand injured, and two thousand having deserted, but the reality was that some counted among the dead could have simply run away, and vice versa. When it came to losing battles, even the extent of one’s losses could be unclear.

Incidentally, the Beilschmidt border regiment had only lost close to one hundred soldiers, and these losses were exclusively from the Black Knight Brigade.

With some prompting from Latrielle, Germain spoke up. “I will henceforth report the state of the First Army. We had joined with the Third Army and, counting mercenaries, were approximately thirty thousand strong. We only lost one thousand troops in combat; there has been no major change to our fighting force, and our supplies are all in order.”

That was to be expected when the main camp had been ambushed and nothing else. Germain continued, next reporting on the High Britannian Army.

“At present, the northern and southern divisions of the High Britannian Army

have merged back together. They now number around seventeen thousand.”

Germain placed a number of pieces on the map, red representing the Belgarian Army, and blue the enemy. Forty-four thousand against seventeen thousand—Belgaria had an overwhelming numerical advantage.

Latrielle set down the piece he had been playing with. “Considering the Second and Seventh Armies’ defeats, even this staggering numerical advantage does not ensure victory. In order to protect the capital, we have no choice but to join all of our forces and launch a coordinated assault.”

Germain bolstered Latrielle’s words with a deep, somber nod.

Regis couldn’t deny that, while it was a straightforward plan, it wasn’t a terrible one. While the Seventh Army had been infantry-centered, the forces now at their disposal included five thousand cavalry. By charging the enemy’s flank, they could keep casualties to a minimum.

However, the Empire had already lost thirty thousand soldiers. Were they to lose the majority of their remaining forces—especially the First Army—they would struggle to hold their other war fronts when this war came to an end. After all, High Britannia wasn’t Belgaria’s only enemy. Latrielle was painfully aware of this, and that was precisely why he was so torn.

“Sir Regis, do you have another idea?”

Regis could sense that something was slightly off. Based on what he knew about Latrielle’s nature, it was at times like these that the wise prince would normally look him dead in the eyes as he spoke, as if staring into his very soul. However, Latrielle instead continued staring at the map. Perhaps that simply went to show how serious the situation was. What’s more, he should have asked Altina for her opinion before bringing the matter to her tactician—at least, that was the proper protocol. Was the Empire so badly cornered that he was willing to ignore basic hierarchy?

That can’t be it. Perhaps... A thought came to Regis’s mind, but he immediately pushed it away. *No, I shouldn’t pry into Prince Latrielle for now. As much as it bothers me, I’m in no position to deal with whatever I might find out. I shouldn’t dig around just to sate my curiosity; all it’ll do is make things more dangerous for us. After all, if it turns out the prince is hiding something, there’s a*

chance that he'll need to seal some lips to stop the information from getting out... But anyway, enough about that—let's get our information in order.

The Belgarian soldiers were separated from the capital by seventeen thousand High Britannian troops stationed half a day's march away, and the reports they had received stated that the enemy hadn't moved camp yet. As the weather seemed like it was about to take a turn for the worse, Regis predicted that Britannia would resume their march the next morning at the earliest, but the likelihood was that they wouldn't start moving until a bit later than that. While their camp was set up, they could pitch tents to stave off the rain and prepare simple stoves to provide warm food. Once they started their march, however, they would have to huddle together on the hard ground for warmth and make do with cold meals. That much probably wasn't different for High Britannia, even with their cutting-edge technology.

Forcing the soldiers to endure unnecessary hardships would bring little benefit, which was why—

"I think... the First Army should make for the capital at once."

Latrielle finally raised his head. "In short, Regis, you're saying we should avoid engaging them head-on. You have a plan."

"Something of the sort... Verseilles has no outer walls, but there are still a few forts where we could set up defenses. Would we be able to use them to buy some time?"

"Hm..." Latrielle appeared pensive for a moment, as did Germain. Altina was the only one who had been told the plan in advance, and she was looking just a little smug.

"If we fight High Britannia head-on, the extent of our casualties will put the Empire's continued existence in jeopardy," Regis continued. "Even if we are able to beat them that way, we must avoid a direct confrontation."

"True. Great costs will indeed hinder our future plans."

"However, if we're just stalling the enemy, we should be able to contain the damages. It would be impossible for them to scale our walls while holding up those large shields of theirs, and the newest guns do not have the same

advantages in a siege; the Type-41 Elswicks may be powerful, but they aren't strong enough to breach a fort."

"Yes, stalling might be possible if we give our undivided attention to a defensive battle, but if we stay on the defensive then the Empire will still ultimately collapse. If those other nations sitting on the fence right now see us struggling against High Britannia, they'll surely all come in for the kill."

The neighboring countries were presumably readying themselves for war, and the moment they saw Belgaria on the defensive in a one-sided battle, they would rush in like an avalanche. Had the Empire built favorable relations with its neighbors, perhaps they might have actually provided aid in its time of dire need, but... *Well, it's not like we can do anything about that right now.*

"...You have a point," Regis said. "Due to the potential threat from the other nations, we'll need to have driven High Britannia off by the end of June, at the latest."

"Surely that would be impossible if we're being sieged. What are you proposing, Regis?"

Regis once again scrutinized the plan in his head. He had skimmed through the many books he'd read over his life in search of a situation that was most applicable to the one they were in now, and while he was sure the scheme he had decided on would work, doubts still lingered in his mind.

"...I believe we should strike their supply chain."

"I see..." Latrielle mused over the idea, while Germain beside him looked unconvinced. "And how would we go about doing that? Is this supply chain you speak of the ten thousand troops they have stationed at Port Ciennbourg? I have heard that over half are stevedores and hauliers, but they are guarded by the latest firearms all the same. Securing victory there won't be an easy move, and if we prioritize the safety of the capital, we won't be able to send too many soldiers."

"Yes, those ten thousand would be tough to defeat. And even if we did manage to, it will be completely pointless once the next battalion has been shipped over from their motherland."

“My point exactly,” Latrielle said. “In the end, High Britannia will simply replenish their goods and soldiers...”

Germain didn't seem to follow, but the serious look on Latrielle's face showed that he more than understood what Regis was suggesting. And his expression only turned grimmer as he continued.

“...Which is why you intend to take out their ships, Regis?”

“Correct. High Britannia's supply chain is completely dependent on its sea routes; if we can remove them from the picture, we should be able to turn the tide.”

Latrielle cocked his head. “Unfortunately, that is not possible... The Empire's sailing ships can't beat their steam ships.”

“Of course not. We'd lose the moment we opened fire.”

Regis clearly recognized that High Britannia's ships were far stronger than their own, but then what was his plan? Latrielle listened on in intrigue, but the bemused Germain quickly interjected, his tone now gruff.

“If you can't take down their ships, then cutting off their supply chain is impossible, is it not!?”

“There are plenty of ways to defeat a navy that has nothing but its strength going for it...”

“What!?”

“Right now, I cannot think of any way to protect the Empire save for severing our enemy's sea routes. If you have another idea to fend off a seventeen-thousand-strong army without any major casualties, then it's probably a lot better than anything I can come up with.”

“You acknowledge that the enemy is stronger... yet we'll still win. Is that what you're saying?” Germain muttered, knitting his brow as if pondering a riddle.

“You're asking me to... entrust the fate of the Empire to you?” Latrielle asked to make sure.

“If you have someone in mind who would be better suited to the task, then by all means. I just ask that you tell them to do something about the enemy's

supply chain.”

“That’s impossible. It’d take a magic spell to sink High Britannia’s steam ships.”

“Well, I’m no wizard...”

“But if you *could* manage it, you would need a plan no less astounding than magic. Perhaps you’d be more akin to a monster instead.”

“I have no special talents to speak of. This is a strategy that was already documented in a book, so I know it can be done.”

“I... see.” Latrielle closed his eyes.

Seeing his lord in such a state, Germain gazed at him with concern.

All of a sudden, Altina placed both hands on the table and leaned forward. “What are you thinking so hard about, Latrielle!? You called us here because you couldn’t think of any approaches beyond a frontal assault, right!? A victory like that would render us unable to protect the Empire, so Regis’s plan is much better! Just leave everything to us!”

Latrielle spread out a hand and pushed her back. “Don’t misunderstand me, Argentina... I do have a plan of my own. However, if Regis has a brilliant scheme that he wishes to act on, I have enough surplus to provide him a team to carry it out. That’s all there is to it.”

“Then you’ll approve Regis’s plan?”

“That depends on how many soldiers he’ll need.”

Altina looked to Regis. “So how many are we thinking?”

“Let’s see... I think the border regiment should be more than enough. That is, if we can get some of the locals to cooperate.”

“He says my army is plenty!” Altina proudly puffed out her chest, much to Latrielle’s chagrin.

“So you need the locals’ help? Altina isn’t very well suited to be an envoy.”

“I-I’m pretty quick on my feet, you know.”

“Hah... You have much to learn—war, finance, politics... Perhaps Regis will be

a fine teacher.”

“Yeah, he’s teaching me all sorts of stuff.”

“Good. In that case, the Beilschmidt border regiment shall take in the survivors from the western front, and shall henceforth be known as the Empire’s Fourth Army. I appoint Argentina as its commander; I’ll have to alter your rank for that.”

“My what now?”

“Our admiral of the western seas is Lieutenant General Bertram. How would you lead him if you were of a lower rank? Given your achievements at Fort Volks, I could promote you to lieutenant general. Do you have any complaints?”

“Guess not. I’ve never really thought about my rank.”

“I don’t know what I expected... Germain, the order.”

“Yes, sir!” Germain took out a document and placed it on the table. The notice of appointment had already been filled out; maybe, just maybe, the plan that Latrielle was considering was very similar to Regis’s own. Had he even anticipated their proposal?

But what surprised Regis the most was that, it being a time of emergency aside, he hadn’t so much as hesitated to grant his political rival status and power. *He really is an inexplicable man*, Regis thought, finding himself overcome with awe once again.

“Order received!” Altina announced, grabbing the papers. “I’m sure Regis will do something about the steam ships, so we’re counting on you to buy us time!”

“Hm... Your trust in your subordinates and your boundless optimism are your strengths, Argentina. But remember—I also have loyal subordinates, plus my dignity as the Supreme Commander of the Belgarian Army. I don’t need to hear such words from my sister; under my leadership, the First Army will keep the capital safe!”

At that, Altina and Latrielle exchanged a smile.

Just as Regis and Altina were about to leave, Latrielle stopped them in their

tracks. “Don’t be so hasty. Sir Regis, the paperwork to promote you to a third-grade administrative officer was completed just the other day. Have you already received your appointment?”

“...No?” Regis shook his head, bewildered.

“We didn’t get anything like that... Maybe it’s running late?” Altina suggested, sharing Regis’s confusion.

Fort Volks was located on the Empire’s furthest border, and actually crossed into the Grand Duchy of Varden’s territory. Delivering letters there took time, and the journey came with its own share of problems.

Latrielle nodded. “I see. In that case, we shall write one up now.”

As Latrielle picked up a pen, Germain promptly spread out a sheet of paper on the desk for him. The necessary fields had already been filled out; all it needed was the second prince’s signature.

Notice of Appointment

Sir Regis d’Aurick,

I hereby approve your promotion to the rank of third-grade administrative officer.

Imperial Year 851, May 22nd

Field Marshal Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Marshal General of the Belgian Army

It appeared that Latrielle had risen through the ranks as well. *Now that I think about it, I do remember hearing that the emperor had issued a direct dispatch order before the engagement with High Britannia. Maybe he granted Latrielle a new rank and privileges then.*

Latrielle continued, his tone indifferent. “There should be no issue with the formalities; your direct superior Argentina is here to stand as witness. You will henceforth be treated as a third-grade administrative officer.”

“...Thank you, sir.”

That said, it wasn't as though Regis's job was going to change in any substantial way; he had been given authority and tasked with duties unbefitting his lowly rank from the very start.

*Ah, but my salary should increase, so I guess I can at least buy more books.
That sounds nice...*

As Regis reveled in his meager blessings, Germain handed him the form. Then, he immediately produced another document. “With your promotion, you have also received the peerage of chevalier. Congratulations.”

“...Come again?”

Seeing Regis so taken aback brought a faint smile to Germain's lips. Perhaps this was his petty way of getting back at him. As Regis gave the notice of appointment a closer inspection, he noticed a small “d” beside his name that hadn't been there before.

It was Latrielle who handed him this new document. “When the war comes to an end, you may come to the capital, where the Ministry of Nobility will bestow upon you your certificate. Until then, that document shall serve as proof of your title.”

“Err... So does that mean... I'm a noble?”

In Belgaria, those whose military accomplishments had warranted their promotion to third-grade and above were also generally granted noble peerage. What's more, while bestowing noble titles was usually something that could only be done by the emperor himself, for the rank of chevalier—and only the rank of chevalier—the Ministry of Nobility could stand in as his proxy.

Officially speaking, there was no relation between military rank and noble peerage. But over the course of Belgaria's lengthy history, very few commoners had ever risen to the rank of third-grade without being made a noble as well.

Germain tilted his head. “I hear that many soldiers make becoming a chevalier their life's goal... but it seems you are not one of them. You don't look very pleased.”

“Oh, no, that’s not...”

Regis had made his resolve back when he first heard he was going to be promoted to third-grade, but now that the time had actually come, he couldn’t help but hesitate.

Germain narrowed his eyes in response. *When he makes that face, the man reminds me of a snake*, Regis thought.

“I have also heard that, among commoners, there are some who are hostile to nobles and the very system of nobility. You wouldn’t happen to be one of *them*, would you, Sir Regis?”

“The liberalists...? I wouldn’t dream of joining them.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“However... if those in power are under the impression that everyone with a peerage is blessed by fortune, and everyone without is cursed, then I do think there might be something wrong with the system. A nation exists to bring fortune to everyone within its borders; the privileges of nobles should be exercised not for personal interest, but to more efficiently distribute happiness among the populace as a whole.”

Germain furrowed his brow, but Regis lightly shook his head and continued.

“Of course, I’m sure that Prince Latrielle and Sir Germain are prioritizing the people’s happiness above all else. All I’m saying is that there’s no reason I should be happy simply because I’m a noble, and no reason that being a commoner should have brought me misfortune. Am I wrong?”

“...That is... certainly true.”

“In which case, it would be strange for me to be so simple-mindedly overjoyed at being knighted. My stomach turns at the thought of placing such heavy responsibility on someone so unworthy.”

“In...teresting. How terribly insightful. I expect no less from you, Sir Regis.”

“It is my pleasure.”

In the end, despite having received a peerage, Regis couldn’t even muster a smile. Latrielle, on the other hand, wore a grin as he gave the new third-grade a

magnanimous nod.

“Ah, of course, Regis—your caliber expands beyond the title of chevalier. One day, perhaps you’ll be supporting me alongside Germain.”

“Y-You overestimate me...”

All of a sudden, Regis felt something tug hard on his arm.

“No chance! Regis is *my* tactician!”

“Then you’ll just have to join him and work as my right-hand woman. I don’t remember taking back my proposal from that night.”

Altina stuck out her tongue. “Not. On. Your. Life.”

It appeared that Latrielle was already accustomed to his half-sister’s childish, impudent attitude, as his expression didn’t change in the slightest.

Altina turned on her heel, keeping her vice-like grip on Regis’s arm, and threw open the hanging cloth that served as the entrance to the tent. “We’re off, Regis! To the west!”



Latrielle closed his eyes; there was a sharp, throbbing pain in the back of his head. He could hear the tent entrance being pushed open, then noticed the surrounding light fade. Had the entrance been closed again? He couldn’t feel a breeze anymore.

Germain reassigned the guards in the room to security detail outside, ordering them to keep everyone away. Soon, another presence entered the tent.

“Pardon my intrusion,” came an incredibly nervous voice.

Latrielle opened his eyes. He could faintly make out a person with a stout build. “...Doctor.”

“Can you see me?”

“Better than yesterday.”

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“...I can’t say. But today, I can tell you’re holding up your right hand.”

“I-I see. Pardon me.” At that, the doctor pried Latrielle’s eyelids open with his fingers and stared deep into his pupils, continuing his examination. “...You’re on the road to recovery.”

“How long will it take?”

The doctor hesitated to answer this question. “...Before I say anything...”

“I despise equivocation, especially when it’s coming from a doctor. Do you understand me? Be frank, and tell me how bad it really is.”

But even then, the military physician was hesitant to continue.

Latrielle waited patiently. At some point, Germain handed him something which turned out to be water. It was only once he had gulped it down that the doctor finally spoke again.

“Hear me, O Lord in Heaven... His Highness Prince Latrielle’s right eye may recover in half a month. His left, however, will never heal. The poison has taken its toll...”

As it turned out, Mercenary King Gilbert had slathered his weapon in poison. Knights considered this to be shameful behavior, but Gilbert was not a knight—he was a mercenary.

“Is that all?”

“Prince Latrielle... Please, oh please, steel your heart. Know that this is surely all a part of God’s great plan. It must be a trial to pave the way to Heaven on Earth.”

“Out with it.”

“Your right eye may recover... for now. However, as it will need to compensate for your left, eventually... in a few years... it, too... will lose its light.”

Latrielle gulped.

There was a sudden *thud* as Germain’s hand struck the table, just barely managing to stop himself from collapsing. “That can’t be...!”

“Don’t lose your head, Germain.”

“B-But sire...!”

“I’ve learned the folly of my tactics and martial arts. I should be thankful I still have my life.”

“Ghh...”

“It seems I’ll have to rely on you even more than before... I’m sorry for the trouble I cause you.”

“Perish the thought! For your sake, I would even go so far as to surrender my life!” Germain exclaimed, dropping to one knee. But Latrielle’s vision had deteriorated so much that even this display of reverence was lost beyond a thick fog.

“My father would not name a blind man as his successor.”

“...Presumably not.”

Latrielle’s father, Emperor Liam XV, held a strong fixation on royal blood, and just as strong of an attachment to health and longevity. He had all-too-easily accepted the sickly first prince’s abdication of his inheritance, and the younger sister Felicia, who had been recuperating for so long at the family home, was never even considered a candidate, regardless of what she had to say on the matter.

Latrielle clenched his fist. “We must cover it up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“My succession isn’t the only issue... Say I do become emperor—if word gets out that I can’t see, it will give nobles and the surrounding nations cause to make light of me.”

“Then it must be covered up, for the sake of stable rule.”

“Indeed... Luckily, my right eye will heal in half a month. And it will hold up for a few years, correct?”

The doctor nodded. “Please be sure to allow it as much rest as possible.”

That’s easier said than done, Latrielle thought. Not only was he at war to

protect the Empire, he was also the Marshal General leading all of its armies. What's more, this was the front line—he needed to be ready to march at a moment's notice at all times.

“I can maintain a siege while blind; that much isn't an issue. By the time the battle is over, my right eye should be back. And Father is old—too old to lead the army in the nation's time of crisis. He should reach his decision soon.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I will become emperor, and I'll change the country. We'll be stronger than—a powerful nation that won't fold to anyone simply because they have newer weaponry. The Empire's weapons and industrial advancements will surpass theirs; our soldiers will be tempered like steel, and our agriculture and livestock will double. We'll set up riparian buffers faster, and I'll punish those nobles eating up taxes for senseless entertainment. We'll do away with those silly banquets, remake those antiquated laws, and reduce the rights of the church that just keep growing unchecked... I must set the foundation so that, a thousand years from now, Belgaria shall remain a lustrous, eternal utopia—so that the Empire shall never wane.”

“Your Highness...” Germain's own vision grew bleary.

Latrielle's voice grew softer, but his words carried a heated intensity. “There are so many in this world who deserve to be rewarded, yet these precious souls are trampled down by unreasonable irrationality. How could this be permitted?”

“Sir.”

Releasing his firmly clenched fist, Latrielle took a deep breath. “And to that end... what we need now is Argentina's victory.”

“Can the Fourth Army really win? At the end of the day, it's a border regiment bolstered by the remnants of defeated armies. High Britannia's ships were strong enough to fight off the imperial fleet.”

“Would it be possible for you, Germain?”

“You only need to give the order, sir! ...Well, that's what I'd like to say, but I can't see how it would be. Lieutenant General Bertram, who took command in

the Battle of Touranne, is an accomplished man, yet even he was forced to retreat without any notable gains.”

“That tactician said we’d lose the moment we opened fire... so how is he planning to take out the ships?”

“I hail from the western coast, so I know the sea and land go by different rules. Regis’s tactics may actually prove useless out there.”

“...Right. He’s from an inland city, isn’t he?”

Regis’s personal history detailed that he had been born in Verseilles. There was a lake close to the capital, but it was a long distance from the sea.

“Is it not dangerous to expect this much from him?”

“...It’s also possible that he simply wanted to distance Argentina’s soldiers from the engagement with the High Britannian Army.”

“Urk... I see.”

“In which case, the future he is envisioning may be different from our own.”

“Princess Argentina aside, Regis seems to be as far from daring as you can get.”

“I’d like to believe he isn’t the sort who would lie to better his standing, but... should he fail to sever the enemy’s supply chain... both the commander and advisor of the Fourth Army shall be held accountable when the war ends.”

If the Fourth Army lost, perhaps the scramble for the throne would actually become easier. However, there was also a chance it would bring about a situation where the Empire’s continued existence was unlikely.

Latrielle winced as another stabbing pain pricked the inside of his head.

“Please get some rest, at least for now. Your blurry vision is taxing your brain more than usual,” the doctor firmly rebuked him.

“...Germain, we march tomorrow morning. Set up a route that will circumvent the enemy and allow us to reach a suitable stronghold before them. It should be possible if we abandon the cannons,” Latrielle said, before closing his eyes and leaning back into his chair.



May 23rd—

The Belgian Army marched through the rain that had picked up late the previous night. The First Army was at the center, supported by the Third Army, a sizable number of mercenaries, and even the remaining soldiers from the Seventh Army. They numbered forty thousand in total.

They had cast aside their cannons and camping supplies, allowing them to move faster than usual. The plan was to detour around the High Britannian Army and set up base near the capital before they arrived.

Meanwhile, the three thousand nine hundred troops of the Beilschmidt border regiment—now the Fourth Army—headed west. As they departed, the remnants of the Seventh Army played the bugle call meant for allied troops; the two forces had been at odds when they first met, but something had changed since then. Did they feel indebted to the border regiment after being saved in the Battle of La Frenge?

But, as always, Regis couldn't help but wonder. *Had I handled the situation better, could I have kept the death toll even lower...?* If anything, he felt like he should be apologizing right now.

Under Altina's orders, the Fourth Army's buglers returned the same tune.

March on, brave soldier, one step more,

For triumph's knocking at your door.

God graces you and guides the way,

We'll share a drink again someday.

It was that sort of song.

They could see the knight called Coigniera saluting from horseback. He had initially scoffed upon seeing the regiment, but that was no longer the case. His true feelings came out in his salute.

Was Dukas somewhere amongst the lines of soldiers? To protect his family in the east, he had pleaded with Regis to push back the advancing High Britannian Army—to protect the Empire. Many soldiers likely shared this sentiment. The people of a defeated nation weren't treated like real people; their assets and lives were left up to the whims of the victor. This was a fate more terrifying than any other.

Atop her beautiful steed, Altina gave Regis a gentle smile. "Looks like the people of the Seventh Army have changed quite a bit! At first, they seemed to think we were enemies."

"We're all soldiers under the same army; the fact we were quarreling to begin with is the strange part."

"I know, right?"

"Hah..."

"What's wrong? You're looking down."

"...I'm just not used to people having such high expectations of me. It's a lot of pressure."

"Don't worry! I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"I hope so..." Regis said with a shrug, before ducking into his white carriage.

"Fourth Army, march!" Altina raised her voice to address the troops and pointed westward, and on her command, the air echoed with the tumultuous tremor of a great many feet beating the earth.

Chapter 2: Narissa of the Western Sea

The Fourth Army marched toward the western coast. Despite them having discarded their supplies to travel faster, the bad weather and growing fatigue slowed the soldiers' steps, making the journey take a few more days than anticipated.

May 29th, the evening of the seventh day—

Without the necessary facilities to set up camp, the army's base of operations had become quite shabby: a small table and some chairs, sectioned off using linen cloth. Having been summoned by Altina, Regis was once again subjected to crisp salutes by the armored foot soldiers standing on guard as he brushed the cloth aside to enter.

"Pardon me."

"Glad you could make it, Regis!"

As it was the custom in the Belgarian Empire to never allow noblemen or noblewomen to sit on the floor, chairs were a must even on the battlefield. Three had already been prepared, two of which were empty. Altina was seated in the furthest one, while Clarisse stood nearby with her back to the cloth partition.

Regis took the nearest seat. "...Now that I think about it, this is probably your first time camping without a tent. Are you sleeping okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Back when I was a kid, I'd sometimes nap on the open plains. Are the soldiers holding up okay?"

"For now, at least... It's a forced march, but because you're taking the initiative and sleeping with just a thin cloth yourself, they can't really complain."

"Well, we're feeding them plenty to compensate."

"Yes, that's the most important part—we prepared even more food than

usual. Even though they're in a tough spot, it's hard for them to protest when they're getting their fill. 'He who eats best, wins most!' That's what the great hero Roman wrote in *Why My Military Is Supreme*."

"Precisely." Altina nodded a strong affirmative; she was always saying that she felt completely devoid of strength when her stomach was empty. "It'd be great if the other armies followed our example and prepared more as well."

"Yeah... That would be tough to put into practice, though—you'd need more people to transport it, and more people means more food required."

"But we're doing it. How does that work out?"

"We're getting our food supplies from towns along the way. By restocking in the middle of our expedition, we don't have to carry as much."

"I see... Huh? But this expedition was kinda spur of the moment. Have you been sending horses ahead to place orders?"

"Doing that would have been risky, given the limited amount of time we have to work with. If a purchase hadn't gone through, then our soldiers would starve. And if the merchants in these towns found out we needed the food no matter what, they might take advantage of us. We're maintaining food stocks at certain posts, periodically buying and selling to keep the supply from going bad."

"Is that what the other armies do?"

"Not as far as I'm aware. We rarely mount expeditions within the Empire's borders, so it wouldn't work under most circumstances... In short, we're pretty much buying what's cheap, then selling it again when the price goes up. Anything we don't see an increase for, our army gets to use. The market price of cooking ingredients fluctuates quite wildly, you see."

"Hm... That sounds kind of amazing..." Altina said, a sparkle in her eyes. "So that's what we're doing."

Regis simply shrugged. "Don't look at me; I'm not the one doing the actual transactions. It's hard to do business near the capital from out on Fort Volks, so I had Elenore help out."

Elenore Ailred Winn de Tiraso Laverde was the granddaughter of a duke, and

while she was only a young woman, she wielded enough authority to make her the de facto head of her house. Her booming enterprise dealt with large-scale plantations in the south, as well as many local specialties. She'd been saved by Regis once before, and had since then proven all too eager to help him out.

"Hmm..." Altina's tone dropped, though Regis remained none the wiser.

"The best way to get a grasp on the country's economic situation is to stick your hands in, even if only on a small scale. I won't say you're guaranteed to make a profit, but it prepares you for what's to come. Plus, building relationships with merchants can prove pretty useful down the line."

"...So you want to build a relationship with Ms. Elenore?" Altina asked. Her voice was ice-cold.

Regis suddenly remembered that Elenore had once jokingly kissed him on the cheek, which had made the princess considerably displeased.

Still standing beside the cloth partition, Clarisse let out a deep sigh. "Good grief, you really are a Regis."

"Err... Are you still hung up on that? She was just playing around, right?"

And as that exchange went on—

"I'm coming in." A solemn voice echoed out, quickly followed by Jerome marching through the partition. While he was still wearing his sword on his belt, he had removed his helmet and armor.

Altina remained seated, but placed a hand on her hip in frustration. "Well, aren't you late."

"Hmph." Jerome plopped down into the open seat, not even offering an excuse. Meanwhile, Clarisse poured warm tea for everyone.

No sooner had Regis pressed the cup to his lips than he spoke out in surprise. "This is incredible, Ms. Clarisse. It's hard enough to boil water without a stove, and the taste isn't in any way inferior to the usual."

"I am glad it is to your tastes, sir," she answered flatly, before deeply bowing her head. She barely ever spoke around those she hadn't opened up to. When only Regis and Altina were present, she would often laugh, joke, and tease...

But as soon as Jerome entered, every shred of expression was hidden away and she became someone else entirely.

Altina took a sip and smiled. "Thanks for doing this, Clarisse."

"...My pleasure." She bowed again, then moved back against the cloth wall, as unmoving as an ornament.

Jerome placed his finger on the map on the table. He seemed to have no interest in the tea, instead wetting his lips with a bottle of wine he'd brought in with him.



“Oi, Regis. We’ll be at Fort Letroisti tomorrow, right?”

Fort Letroisti was half a day’s march from Port Ciennbourg—which was currently occupied by High Britannia—and was where the survivors from the Second Army had been stationed, as well as troops gathered from the surrounding territories. They numbered over ten thousand according to a messenger, making them a substantial force.

Regis tilted his head, still holding his teacup in one hand. “I’m not too sure. In preparation for the future, we should establish contact to ensure their cooperation. But right now I want to meet with the navy, and we don’t have a second to lose.”

Jerome nodded. “So we should hurry to the sea.”

“...Yes, but we still need the soldiers at Fort Letroisti. If we just send an urgent order at the last second, we likely won’t be able to coordinate any strategic action.”

“You decide what we’re gonna do, then,” Jerome grunted. “It’s not like the princess can.”

“Mrk...” Altina pouted. “Well, I can’t, I’ll admit, but... Mn...”

Regis fell into thought for a moment. “I think we should split into two forces. I’ll meet with the fleet and prepare for the operation.”

“Oh? Then what about me!?” Altina asked, eagerly starting to rise from her seat.

“Naturally, I’ll need you to go to the Second Army. Sir Jerome, I’m counting on you to guard the princess.”

“Hmph. I knew it,” Jerome said with a nod.

But he wouldn’t just be serving as her guard. Having Jerome—a man renowned for his military prowess—accompany Altina was sure to make the Second Army’s officers more inclined to follow her lead than if she had gone alone. That said, she had a letter from Latrielle, was of a higher military rank, and was a member of royalty, so Regis could see them obeying her regardless.

Altina froze midway through standing up, her eyes wide open. “Regis! It’s

dangerous for you to go alone!”

“We’re in a race against time. I assume hostilities are already taking place near the capital, and while I can’t imagine a fort defended by General Latrielle will fall too easily, the casualties will only increase the longer we take. And if our losses are too great, it will defeat the whole purpose of severing the enemy’s supply chain.”

“You’re right about that...”

“What if the fleet gets dragged into another naval battle before I arrive? If our ships sink, we’ll have an especially tough time. Also, if we allow the enemy to bring in any large-scale shipments, the chances of the capital falling will increase dramatically.”

“I understand that, but... will you be okay?”

“I’ll have your name and signature; that should be enough to earn their trust.”

“That’s not what I mean! We’re already pretty close to the enemy, aren’t we? And the port that our fleet was pushed back to is very near to Ciennbourg...”

Assuming Regis’s information was to be trusted, the imperial fleet was currently using a fishing village near Port Ciennbourg as its base of operations. It was not the sort of place one would expect to see military ships, but the men needed food and water, so they had dropped anchor by the shore. Walking along the coast, it would take over half a day to reach Port Ciennbourg from there, but by steam ship it wouldn’t even take two hours.

“Pah.” Jerome scoffed and prodded the map. “What are you gonna do, princess? Are you rejecting the strategist’s proposal?”

“Th-That’s... I don’t think Regis is wrong here, but... aren’t you worried about him, Jerome?”

“Everyone dies eventually. All that matters is whether you keel over like a dog in a ditch, or you die a noble death fighting for your country. I plan to live and die by the sword, and I’m sure the strategist wants to die on his own terms as well.”

Upon hearing Jerome’s words, Altina hung her head and paused for a

moment. She then looked up with a sincere expression and spoke slowly, as if carefully thinking over each word. “Yes... You... might be right... I have my own goal... and I think I’d rather die for it... than live a life without purpose.”

The resolve of one who carried a sword lent immense weight to these words—so much so that Regis hesitated for a second before speaking up. “Um... I don’t really want to die, you know.”

Both Altina and Jerome fell silent.

I mean, I won’t be able to read my books if I’m dead... Those were Regis’s true thoughts, but he decided to keep them to himself and move on. “Anyway—the objective of the Queen’s Navy is to maintain their supply chain; they would never attack a fishing village that has no military value.”

Anxious as she was, Altina sat back down. “As long as you’re okay doing this...”

Jerome prodded the map again. “Have you decided how we’ll be organizing ourselves yet?”

“One hundred cavalry should be enough for me. We’ll also bring a wagon containing the bare minimum supplies we need to survive. I can ride in that alongside the food.”

Altina cocked her head. “What about that white carriage?”

“Ms. Clarisse will get more use out of it. I imagine she’ll want to accompany you.”

“Right...” The princess glanced over at Clarisse, but as the maid was in her quiet phase, she didn’t even try to express her own thoughts. She simply stood there like a soulless doll.

“All right.” Jerome stood up. “One hundred cavalry, yeah? I’ll pick out those who won’t let the navy take charge.”

“Could I ask for some peaceful, rational soldiers...?”

“Hah! My men are all perfect gentlemen. Well, as long as people do what they’re told.”

“...Then at least give me soldiers who won’t draw their swords unless ordered

to, please?”

“Kukukuh...” After responding with no more than a joyful chuckle, Jerome was gone.

Altina sighed. “How impatient. I never said the meeting was over.”

“Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

“There isn’t, but... will you really, *really* be okay, Regis?”

“I don’t want to die, so I’ll keep myself out of danger as best I can. Trust me.”

Altina stared long and hard at him, biting her lower lip and scrunching up her face like a child separated from its parents. She was fifteen years old, having reached adulthood just the other day, but every now and again she pulled a face that made her look much younger than she actually was.

“...I’ll be heading your way as soon as I finish discussing matters with the commander at Fort Letroisti,” she eventually said.

“Yes. Even if we’re operating independently, it should only be for a day at most.”

“Urgh... I should have at least taught you how to ride a horse properly. If things get dangerous, promise me you’ll run away, okay?”

“You worry too much,” Regis said dismissively. Despite how much he wanted her to trust him, he couldn’t help but feel a warmth in his chest knowing that someone cared about him so deeply.

“Say what you will, Regis, but you’re no good when it comes to weapons and horses. Letting you wander so close to the enemy is way too dangerous... Right, Clarisse? You’re worried about him too, aren’t you?”

Before Regis knew it, even the maid standing on the sidelines had a somewhat melancholic look on her face. “That’s right... I’m very worried indeed,” she said.

Regis smiled at her. “I’ll be fine, I tell you. The enemy won’t come near me.”

“It’s just that, whenever Mr. Regis is on his own...”

“Hm?”

In an instant, Clarisse's voice turned cold. "...I fear he'll find a new woman."

Altina's terrifying expression seemed to agree, and she fixed Regis with an icy glare.

This is strange... Where did that warm feeling go? All I'm getting now are chills.





The following day, May 30th—

Having split away from the Beilschmidt border regiment, Regis arrived at a fishing village called Hugovie. The wind was damp, and the smell of seaweed was thick in the air.

I see. So this is what they mean by a salty sea breeze.

Regis had read about the ocean in books, but this was his first time actually seeing it in person. The color blue stretched out along the horizon.

The one hundred horsemen were gathered under Abidal-Evra, a second-grade combat officer. Regis had been appointed head of the division despite Abidal-Evra exceeding him in both age and rank, but no one complained about this; they had all already accepted Regis as their tactician.

Every knight that Jerome had selected was a skilled rider, which had allowed them to arrive two hours earlier than scheduled. It was just around noon when they rode into town.

The village was small, containing only thirty to forty houses, but the number of smoke trails far exceeded what would be expected for such a small population. The grounded sailors must have been preparing their meals.

A number of small fishing boats lined the sandy bow-shaped beach, while the military ships were anchored further offshore. There were just over thirty in total, some big and some small.

Regis let out a sigh of relief. *Thank goodness we're not too late.*

A fence around the height of an average-sized adult stretched along the land around Hugovie, most likely as a countermeasure against beasts rather than armies. A great number of sailors were gathered on the inner side, watching the approaching horsemen that made up Regis's division. Their arrival came as no surprise; Regis had sent out a messenger in advance, and so they were able to get into the village without any hold-ups.

Walking among the horsemen, Regis was led to the largest house in the

center of the village. This was probably where the village chief lived, and the fact that naval officers were guarding the doors and halls suggested it was being used as a temporary military headquarters. It wasn't a particularly large abode, and so all the knights except Abidal-Evra waited outside on standby.

The sentry standing at the door fixed his upper arms by his sides, then clenched his right hand into a fist and touched it to his chest. It was the naval salute. His gaze wasn't focused on Regis, however, but on Abidal-Evra. That much wasn't a surprise—Abidal-Evra carried the overwhelming air of an important knight, after all. His shoulders and chest were broad, he sported impressive facial hair, and his armor was first-class.

Regis, on the other hand, wasn't exuding even a trace of dignity, nor was he wearing any armor or carrying a sword.

Having already grown weary of explaining the situation, Abidal-Evra simply returned the salute. "Tactician, why not wear your armor and sword, at least during moments like these?" he whispered once they were out of earshot, trying to stifle a sigh.

"Well, you see... it wouldn't make a difference. I still wouldn't look like a leader."

"Then why don't you put your medals on? Surely you were awarded something for capturing Fort Volks and saving the Seventh Army."

"Those are more the princess's achievements than my own, and the soldiers are the ones who actually risked their lives. Besides, dressing myself up too well might lead someone to assume I actually have ambitions, and that's one surefire way to sour the mood."

"At the very, *very* least, walk with your back straight."

"...Yes, sir." And so Regis did his absolute best to correct his hunch and look forward as he walked.

Before long, Regis and Abidal-Evra arrived at the command room—or at least, what was supposed to be the command room. It was very clearly just the chief's living room. Six officers were waiting beside a sofa, dressed in military uniforms

that differed from those worn by the knights who fought on land. At the front was a middle-aged man with an abundant red beard, who offered a powerless salute as they approached.

“My name is Christophe Denis de Bertram,” he said, introducing himself. “I am the admiral of the western fleet and a lieutenant general in the imperial army. It is a pleasure to meet you, young tactician of the land.”

“Likewise. I am Third-Grade Administrative Officer Regis Aurick of the Empire’s Fourth Army.”

At that, Regis noticed Abidal-Evra make an expression like he wanted to interject. That was when he remembered—since he had been granted the title of chevalier, his official name was now Regis d’Aurick. But he would just sound foolish trying to correct himself, so he pretended not to notice.

There was only one young man among the six officers, who seemed to be serving as an adjutant; the others were all older men around the same age as the admiral. They saluted and revealed their names and ranks in turn. As it turned out, these men were captains of the fleet’s more prominent ships.

In the navy, captains would receive orders from the admiral, then instruct sailors on their own ships to carry them out as best they could. When combat broke out, unlike in land wars where individual martial prowess was important, it was usually the competence of the admiral and captains that determined the course of battle.

Regis lowered himself into the seat he’d been offered, while Abidal-Evra stood behind him. Soon, Bertram and the others had settled down on the sofas as well. *Come to think of it, unlike the men outside, they immediately saluted me rather than Abidal-Evra.*

“Err... Pardon me if I’m mistaken, but have we met before?” Regis asked.

“Indeed. It was during last month’s festivities. I noticed you speaking to Princess Argentina from afar.”

“I see. Then I really must apologize. I never came to pay my respects.”

“No need. I was purposely keeping my distance from the power struggle, you see. It does not matter who takes the throne next; my fleet will spread its sails

for the Empire.”

“That’s what my superior, the princess, is counting on.”

Bertram nodded, then his face started to cloud over. “But right now, I’m having a hard time fulfilling that oath. High Britannia’s warships are just far too powerful.”

“...So it seems.”

Regis found himself quite surprised. Not only was Bertram a lieutenant general and a duke, but he was approaching fifty years old, making Regis below him in rank, title, and age. For this reason, Regis hadn’t expected to be treated so courteously. What’s more, it was a pleasant surprise to see the admiral openly recognize how strong the enemy fleet was.

Bertram smiled. “For those on the land, it might look like we’re losing our nerve—that we’re hiding in a corner...”

“No, not at all.”

“Let me speak of our situation in numbers.”

“Of course.”

“High Britannia’s steam-powered Princess-class—a high-speed, 74-cannon ship of the line—travels at roughly 15 knots. In contrast, our largest sailing ship—the 80-cannon Aeterna-class—can barely reach that speed under perfect wind conditions.”

“And those ships were only saved because they put all their efforts into protecting themselves. Once the battle started, they weren’t even able to run away.”

“Regrettably. The enemy is equipped with Elswick cannons, and their firing range is somewhere around 45 arpents (3216 m).”

“That would be the Type-41.”

“Indeed.”

“If I remember correctly, the Aeterna-class’s largest anti-ship cannons have a range of 38 arpents (2715 m). What’s more, they take twice as long to load and

fire compared to the enemy's cannons."

"You did your research. As expected of you, from what I've heard."

"It's nothing more than information I recalled from a book."

Bertram gave an understanding nod. "There are currently three Princess-class ships docked at the port. We have nine of our main Aeternas, and tomorrow... our Poseidam-class 120-cannon armored ship of the line is scheduled to arrive."

"From the southern sea, correct?"

"They started sending it north the moment High Britannia invaded, but it's an incredibly slow ship."

"With its lower speed and shorter firing range, would our Poseidam-class be able to defeat their Princess-class?"

"It'd be tough; the enemy would likely just chip away at our ship from outside its range. The Poseidam-class has a sturdy outer shell, but also two major weaknesses."

"The sails and the cannons?"

"Indeed. If our enemy manages to rip holes through the sails, the ship will move even slower than usual—even changing its orientation would become an ordeal. And if a shell goes through the gun ports on our flanks, then worst-case scenario, it'll ignite our gunpowder supplies."

"Hm... If we just had a ship that was faster than the enemy—even one that loses on firepower—then we would at least have a means of escape..."

"The Urathenos-class 18-gun support ship is a little faster, and we have 20 in total. They can't exchange fire, though; the enemy'll get a shot or two in before we can even get close enough to retaliate. Plus, unlike the sturdy Aeterna-class, the small Urathenos catches fire easily and will be impossible to steer if we take a direct hit."

"...Sounds like stalling High Britannia will be no easy task."

Bertram's expression remained grim. "We tried launching an attack on the transport ships carrying the enemy's supplies ourselves."

“During the Battle of Touranne?”

“We predicted their routes and came from the windward side. It was all shaping up to be a certain victory, but... the enemy fire was intense, and we lost four Aeterna-classes.”

“Were there any gains?”

“I’m sure a few of our shots made contact, but that wasn’t enough to sink the Princess-class. We sunk one transport ship and disabled another, but we were already trying our hardest to retreat by that point, so I don’t know what happened from there onward.”

“So it was a total defeat...”

“If you want me to be blunt about it, yes. Almost every ship we have that can sail the western sea is gathered here. The only ones you won’t find are those under maintenance.”

“Then we can’t afford to lose again,” Regis said. Repairing a ship could take close to a year, and they weren’t easy to replace.

“I’m certain that High Britannia has spares for both their Princess-class ships and their transport ships. We, on the other hand, only have the vessels here at our disposal.”

“...Right.”

“That is our present situation,” Bertram said heavily, staring at Regis with a sharp glint in his eyes.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“The difference in might is as clear as day, and we can’t lose the forces we have here. Do you think there’s anything we can do?”

Regis nodded. “I do.”

The surrounding officers were astir, while Bertram’s eyes grew even sharper. “You may have achieved results on land, but... the sea might not be quite what you’re expecting.”

“I know that, and I’m not perfectly confident, but... if we don’t win on the sea,

then the Belgarian Empire will suffer a defeat it can never recover from.”

The naval officers exchanged looks; perhaps they weren’t aware how things had been progressing on land.

“The High Britannian Army had enough momentum to tear through both the Second and Seventh Armies. Even the First Army will have its hands full just defending the capital,” Regis plainly informed them.

“You’re saying that even General Latrielle might not win...?”

“It would be a huge weight off our shoulders if he did, but... it will no doubt be a tough battle. The gap between our weaponry is just too great.”

“So things are that bad, huh...?”

“If enemy supplies keep coming in, the warfront will stagnate until, eventually, the surrounding countries rally their armies to attack. The capital would be encircled by tens of thousands of soldiers.”

The officers’ faces paled, and Bertram fell into thought.

Regis stood up. “General Latrielle gave an order with his authority as marshal general: the men here have been placed under the command of the Fourth Army, and by extension Princess Argentina. I serve as the princess’s strategist, so I do have somewhat of a say here, but we are at war. Lives are on the line, and I don’t expect you to trust me when we’ve only just met. I’ll take my leave for now. Please get together and consider the situation.”

“What happens if we refuse you?”

“...To be honest, my role won’t change at all. I never intended to give orders from the start. I’ll just explain a plan that I hope you’ll be satisfied with, and if you decide to ignore it, well... I’ll be a bit troubled.”

“Hm... Just a moment ago, you said you lacked confidence. But from what I can see, you seem to have complete confidence in your plan.”

“I really do lack confidence. I just happen to know a thing or two from a few stories I’ve read which involve similar situations.” At this remark, Bertram and his men shot Regis curious glances, but he promptly said his goodbyes and made for the door. “I’m going to have a look at Ciennbourg. I’ll be back before

dinner.”

“Oh? Are you going to use one of our ships?”

“Heavens, no. I don’t have your permission yet, Admiral, so I couldn’t possibly use the warships. I just want to do some reconnaissance, so a dingy is plenty. I’ll try and negotiate with one of the local fishing boats.”

“...You’re a strange man, Regis Aurick.”

“I hear that a lot,” Regis replied, his lips curling into a wry smile as he put the command room behind him.



After passing between two lines of houses—a gap so narrow that he hesitated to even call it a road—Regis came out into the harbor where the fishing boats were moored. He could feel the salt in the air, and the scent alone was enough to make his tongue tingle. Abidal-Evra and five other knights were accompanying him; the rest had been permitted to stay behind and take a break.

Fishing was generally done in the morning, so there wasn’t a soul in sight by the time they arrived. And while this technically was the village’s harbor, the boats were simply resting on the sand, fastened in place with rope so that they weren’t snatched away by the waves.

Abidal-Evra tilted his head. “Why do they go to the effort of dragging the boats out of the water?”

“Judging by their position, I’d say their bows were just barely touching the sand when they were tied down,” Regis replied.

“How does that work?”

Now that Regis thought about it, many soldiers from the border regiment never would have had the chance to learn about the sea.

“There is a phenomenon known as the tide, you see...” This referred to a periodic rise and fall in the water level, and was caused by the gravitational forces exerted by the sun and moon, Regis explained.

“Gravitational, you say...?”

“That’s right. It was written about in *A Treatise of Celestial Mechanics*, published by the scholar Pierre Simon just the other day. The book systematized the movement of certain bodies through mathematical—”

Abidal-Evra’s head was already spinning. He promptly cut Regis off and pointed into the distance. “Oh, Tactician! There’s someone in that boat!”

“Hm?”

I wasn’t finished yet, but... Deciding to put his lesson aside for now, Regis approached the fishing boat. There was a young man with brick-brown hair on board, busy tidying up a net. He looked to be around seventeen or eighteen, and while he appeared quite slender, he was actually incredibly muscular. Fifteen was the age of adulthood in Belgaria, so despite how young this man looked, he was surely a first-rate fisherman.

Regis raised a hand to greet him. “Hello there. Do you have a moment?”

The man immediately stood bolt upright, visibly wary.

“Did I startle you?” Regis asked, nonchalantly moving his raised hand behind his head and gripping his own hair.

“Wh-Whaddya want, Soldier?”

“Does this boat belong to you?”

“Part a’ it. Somethin’ wrong with that?”

It seemed that the boat was co-owned. That wasn’t particularly rare; fishing was a task that usually required several people, and buying and maintaining a fishing boat cost money. Perhaps it belonged to his family. But that wasn’t the only thing that Regis had deduced from the response—as it turned out, the villagers weren’t so welcoming of the imperial army. In fact, this young man seemed downright fearful.

Granted, whenever troops are stationed somewhere, it’s a lot rarer to find locals who actually have good relations with them than those who don’t, Regis lamented. Soldiers tended to act under the impression that they were protecting the people or responding to an emergency, so were generally quite arrogant and always giving orders as a result. In this regard, the house that the

western fleet was using as their headquarters had probably been confiscated.

What this meant was that, to the villagers, there was little difference between soldiers and bandits—both were considered uninvited guests. But even with that being the case, Regis didn't want to back down just yet; he needed to make sure the groundwork was laid before Altina arrived.

"Truth be told, I wanted to see how things were going at Port Ciennbourg and on the surrounding seas. Do you know of anyone who could take me out there?"

Regis had initially intended to ask the young man, but it was clear from his attitude that he was unlikely to agree. The man returned quite a reluctant look, but didn't outright refuse to answer. Such was the power of Regis's incredible persuasion skills—or rather, the intimidating aura coming from the knights behind him.

"I-In that case, you should ask the chief... He knows way more than me."

"And where might I find this chief?"

"In that house the soldiers've made their headquarters."

"I see."

Regis presumed the chief was staying in a different room from the one he had met Bertram in, so it seemed they would have to go right back where they'd come from.

All of a sudden, there was the energetic patter of nimble feet against stone. Regis turned to see someone racing across the embankment wall as swiftly as a cat, wearing a light cloth skirt. Her once-black hair had been bleached a reddish brown from prolonged sun exposure, and it was fluttering behind her as she ran.

"Oiiii! What're you doin' to my boat!?" came a shrill yell.



The girl kept running along the wall. She looked around fifteen—presumably about the same age as Altina—and had piercing black eyes that left quite a lasting impression. Upon reaching the end of the embankment, she jumped down onto the beach and continued sprinting full pelt, now moving with so much momentum that Regis feared she would smack straight into him.

A huge cloud of sand kicked up into the air as the girl came to a sudden stop just short of impact. “That’s my boat you’re eyeing there!” she snapped.

“Oh, so this boat belongs to the two of you?” Regis asked. “No need to worry. I’m not going to do anything to it; I just had a few questions.”

At that, she let out a long sigh of relief. “Had me worried for a sec there... Thought you were gonna make off with it.”

“Haha... Even if the imperial army’s backed into a corner, we’re not going to confiscate an old fishing boat.”

“Hmph. Well sorry my boat ain’t worth your effort. I’ll tell you this, though—appearances ain’t what keeps you afloat!” Her tone was suddenly harsh again, and she was pursing her lips in a pout. It seemed that her attitude changed as sporadically as the eyes of a cat, bouncing from one extreme to the other.

Regis faltered. “Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. A fishing boat supports the life and wellbeing of a fisherman and his family, right? Confiscating a person’s livelihood is a horrible thing to do.”

“You lot already took a few of our houses! Ain’t that even worse!?”

“I believe the army is only borrowing them. At least, I hope that’s the case... I never really asked for any specifics.”

Unable to watch anymore, the young man in the boat spoke up. “Don’t go pickin’ a fight with the soldiers, Narissa. We were just talkin’, okay? Get outta here.”

“What’re ya sayin’, Phip? I came as fast as I could ’cause you looked so helpless. How ’bout some gratitude here?” Narissa snapped back. “So tell me—what were you talkin’ about?”

“Nothin’ to do with you.” Phip’s words were brusque, but came out a lot

weaker than before. He was clearly being worn down by her intensity.

Regis repeated what he'd said before. "I want to see what the situation is like at Port Ciennbourg, so I was asking whether he knew anyone who could show me around."

"Show you around? You mean, like, on a boat?"

"Yes, I want to see what the occupied port looks like. On top of that, I hope to gather as much information on the surrounding seas as possible, so I'd prefer someone who knows how to handle a boat."

"Then go to the chief..." Phip muttered. But Narissa firmly shook her head.

"That's a lost cause! The chief's been refusin' to go out to sea lately. Keeps sayin' his back hurts. You just need someone who knows their way around a boat, yeah?"

"That's right. I highly doubt High Britannia will mobilize a warship over the presence of a single fishing boat; I'm just a bit short on time at the moment, so I'd like someone who's skilled and a boat that's on the faster side."

"Well, you're in luck—I know who the best sailor is, and they've got the fastest boat in town."

Phip grabbed his net and shot up. "Oi, Narissa! Quit screwin' around! Nothin' good comes from gettin' involved with soldiers!"

"Shut up, Phip!"

"Guh... You're... You're on your own, okay?"

Seeing this exchange, Regis posed the most pertinent question. "Would this fastest boat happen to be yours?"

"You know it! We're the fastest in the village. Won't even lose to Seelow's rig over there!"

"Who...?"

"You see the huge house over on that side? He keeps buyin' all the newest boats just 'cause he thinks he's some kinda bigshot. But he sucks at using 'em, so he's real slow."

“I... see.” Looks like this sort of thing even happens in small fishing villages.

Regis took another look at Phip and Narissa’s boat. It honestly didn’t look much different from the others around it.

“Phip’s seriously bad at readin’ the wind, but he’s king at adjustin’ the net and sail,” Narissa said, puffing out her chest. “And with me at the helm, we ain’t gonna lose to anyone, no matter where the wind blows!”

“I see, I see... And you’re very knowledgeable about these seas, are you?”

“Of course I am! I know ’em better than the fish do!” Narissa proclaimed. She gave her chest a hearty thump, and the mounds hidden beneath her shirt bounced ever so slightly. Just a moment ago, Regis had thought she was the same age as Altina, but maybe she was actually a bit older.

Phip sighed. “You realize you’re gonna be slavin’ for free, right, Narissa?”

“Bwuh!? Ah, you’re right! He’s a soldier! I take it all back, then!”

There was no regulation saying that the army had to pay the civilians they put to work. In most cases, they would either have them work for peanuts or refuse to pay them entirely.

“I’ll pay you the proper amount. I’m not just asking you to take me out on your boat; I want to hear all about the sea. Plus I’ll need your cooperation for a while. If you work for me... Let’s see...” Regis checked his pockets. “I can give you eight sol a day.”

Narissa’s eyes shot wide open. “Eight sol!?”

Phip seemed genuinely surprised as well; he was standing with his mouth agape.

Eight sol was roughly the weekly earnings of a soldier in the standing army, and it was a very respectable sum compared to how much fishermen made. That said, the information that Narissa was offering would prove invaluable in fighting back the High Britannian warships. This was a matter that concerned the very fate of the Empire, and with that in mind, eight sol was actually a frightfully modest sum.

“I’m in! I’m in!” she exclaimed. “Wouldn’t be seen anywhere else! Even if I’ve

gotta do it on my own!”

“If it pays, I’ll join as well,” Phip added.

“That’d be a huge help. My name is Regis Aurick. It’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

“You can call me Narissa. Pleasure’s all mine, Jess!”

“Jess...?” Regis tilted his head.

Phip shrugged. “Narissa cuts names down way more than any sane person would. Name’s Philip Jean Aquanord, by the way.”

“Um... Are you two husband and wife?”

“Pffahahah!” Narissa burst into laughter. “Wrong! Wrong! I’m still only fourteen! Me and Phip here, we’ve known each other forever. Our parents are friends so we fish on the same boat, but that’s all there is to it.”

Around the “that’s all there is to it” part, Phip let out a sigh. *Such is the way of the world, young man...* Regis thought, consoling him internally.

“I see. So you’re childhood friends.”

“I’d like a boat of my own, personally, but my dad’s pretty stubborn. He only trusts me to go out to sea when I’m helpin’ Phip out.”

“Ain’t that because you’re usually just shirkin’ all your housework?” Phip interjected.

“But I’m so good at steerin’!”

“Erk. I’ll get good, too. Eventually...” At that, Phip turned his back to Narissa and started bundling up his remaining fishing nets. His muscular, suntanned body was in no way inferior to the knights’—a testament to just how seriously he took his job. “Oi, Narissa. Don’t just stand there. If we’re goin’ all the way to Ciennbourg, we oughta lighten up first, right? Help me unload here.”

“I know, I know! We’ll be ready to go in a jiff, Jess. When’s good for you?”

“As soon as possible, please.”

Narissa winked. “*Oui, oui!* You got it, boss! Oh, but if speed’s your game, you’re better off bringin’ as few people as possible.”

“I’ll be fine on my own.”

Abidal-Evra, who had stayed silent up to this point, suddenly piped up. “I can’t let you do that, Tactician! If no one else, at least take me.”

“Very well, then. We’ll go together.”

Narissa and Phip unloaded their nets, baskets, and other fishing tools directly onto the beach, just casually leaving them there.

“Won’t those get stolen?” Abidal-Evra asked, rather perplexed.

“Get what...? Pffahahah! We ain’t got any idiots ’round these parts! Everyone knows the sea god’ll sink those who fish with stolen nets!”

Regis found himself exchanging looks with the knight. Belgaria only recognized one particular faith as the true religion, and idolatry was strictly prohibited, but once again, it appeared that the might of God had failed to reach the country’s furthest edges; just as the Beilschmidt border regiment had been influenced by the north’s faith in a goddess, it seemed this area had kept its indigenous god as well.

Phip started pushing the boat while Narissa pulled on the rope.

“I’ll help out!” Abidal-Evra announced, moving beside Phip. The other knights followed his example, helping to shove the boat into the sea.

As soon as it was afloat, Narissa yelled, “Hop on!”

Regis could barely keep up. “Hey... Wait...” Trying to kick off of loose sand and land onto a teetering fishing boat would be even harder than riding a horse. As he hesitated in place, Narissa reached out her hand.

“You comin’ or not, Jess!?”

“Y-Yes!” Regis grabbed her hand and, with the knights pushing him from behind, was finally able to board the boat. In reality, it was more accurate to say that he was loaded on like cargo. Meanwhile, Phip helped Abidal-Evra up.

In no time at all, the boat was drifting out to sea, and Regis was quickly overtaken by a sense of exhilaration. “We’re floating... There are waves... Now isn’t this something!”

“Huh? This your first time out at sea?” Narissa asked.

“Yep. I’ve read about it plenty of times in books, though.”

“That ain’t even close to the real deal. There are loads of things in this world you can’t understand unless you get out there and try ’em yourself.”

“Ha... Maybe so.”

Regis and Abidal-Evra were seated in the space where the nets and fish would usually be kept. The boat was small, but its simple design made it feel quite spacious. A mast stood near the front, sporting a rectangular sail that stretched taught as it caught the wind.

This also seemed to be the case for Narissa’s skirt, which was now flapping every which way. She quickly grabbed it by the hem. “Argh. Only just remembering I changed outta my gear. I never thought I’d be sailin’ past noon, so... Ugh. This is pretty embarrassin’...”

“C’mon, focus on steerin’. No one here’s gonna ogle what you’ve got.”

“You’ve got one comin’, Phip!”

Regis wasn’t particularly bothered, but he had enough common sense to know to look away. *I really should focus on getting a proper view of the sea...*

“Ahem... Are there any shallow spots around Ciennbourg’s bay?”

“There are a buncha places where you’d catch the bottom if you cast a net.”

“Could you point out where they are on this?” Regis asked, producing a sea chart from his bag. The document was somewhat dated, but Port Ciennbourg was located in the depths of a cove and he doubted the shape of the coastline would have changed very much. “What I’m most interested in is whether there are any inside the cove.”

Narissa left the helm to Phip and looked over the sea chart. “Um... Is that supposed to be the port there?”

“That’s right. Ciennbourg is here, and Hugovie is here,” Regis said, tracing his finger between the two points.

“Mhm, mhm.” Narissa nodded quizzically.

As it turned out, she hadn't been wrong about knowing more than the fish did, but her knowledge was mostly limited to the fish themselves.

I'll probably need to use proper tools to get a precise reading on the depth and currents, Regis thought. But the trip had given him a few ideas for places that would be important to his plan, so he didn't feel as though his time had been wasted.



Having observed Port Ciennbourg from afar and looked into various other things, the crew returned just as the sun was sinking into the ocean on the west horizon. To the east, the land had been tinted a warm hue.

Narissa grumbled as she tied up the boat. "Hah, I'm hungry... My arms are killin' me... And my skin's all sticky..."

"Quit complainin'," Phip sighed. "You're the one who accepted the job."

"Oh, so you ain't tired? You can reload our gear on your own, then. I'm gonna go grab dinner."

"You've gotta be kiddin' me."

"Today's food's on the chief, remember? It'll all be gone unless I get goin'."

"If that's what you think, then you'd better get those hands movin' already."

Narissa and Phip continued to squabble as they worked together to load everything back on the boat. *Is this what they call being close enough to fight?* Regis wondered. *What good childhood friends.*

Regis was also feeling dead tired, and the uneasy feeling from his seasickness still lingered. Had he eaten his fill before they set sail, he would have probably been in an even worse state.

While Abidal-Evra was busy hearing out reports from the knights who had stayed behind, Narissa came up to Regis. "Oi, Jess."

"Oh, that's right."

Regis nodded, forcing down the queasy feeling in his stomach. He then took out eight silver sol coins from his pocket and handed them over. While he

would normally ask for a receipt, these were times of war—plus, as Regis was the one who budgeted the expenses of the Fourth Army anyway, it likely wouldn't be an issue.

Narissa checked over each coin before carefully tucking them away into a cloth pouch. "Ehehe. Thanks!"

"No, I should be thanking you."

"Hey, why don'tcha come with me to the town hall? You had a few questions we couldn't answer, right? If you ask everyone there, you're bound to find someone who's got the answers you need."

"Is there some sort of event going on?"

"The chief treats us all to food and wine once a month. Calls it 'mutual aid measures' or somethin'."

"Oh, mutual aid? He sounds like a proper chief to me."

"Yup! So why don'tcha come grab a bite?"

It seemed that this village had a system in place where money was regularly gathered from the villagers, then used to help out whenever someone was beset by an accident or disease. When too much money piled up, it would either be returned or put to use for the whole community. But, naturally, Regis was an outsider to this system; he hadn't contributed to their funds in the slightest.

I guess I can just go and ask a few questions, he decided, letting Narissa lead the way. Together they headed for the town hall, with Abidal-Evra and his men trailing close behind.

The building they were brought to was slightly smaller than the chief's house and located on the edge of town, which was presumably why it hadn't been chosen as the navy's headquarters. Having been told that the chief was treating them, Regis expected food and drink, and for all the villagers to have gathered for a feast.

But there was no food, and despite the room being wide enough for around

forty people to eat at once, there were no tables or chairs. The villagers were instead seated on the wooden floor, discussing something quite seriously.

Narissa's eyes opened wide. "Bwuh!? Where's all the food!?"

"Yes, about that. Today's a bit—" A middle-aged man offered her a gentle response, but his tone changed the moment he caught sight of Regis. "A soldier!?"

The villagers immediately rose up. Some among them had brought harpoons, while others were brandishing more common items that could be used as weapons. Regis simply tilted his head, but Abidal-Evra, who wasn't quite so passive, reached for his sword and stepped forward.

"Step outside, Tactician! Report back to the knights!"

The other guard knights were also on the verge of drawing their blades. Even the young-looking villagers were armed with harpoons, kitchen knives, and machetes. But even so, Regis stayed where he was.

"Hold on, hold on."

"Tactician, do you really not see the danger here!?"

"That's why I'm saying... Everyone, please just wait for a second. Let's all calm down and talk this over. Calmly and rationally." At that, Regis gently placed his hand over Abidal-Evra's sword arm and stepped forward.

I can't deny that the villagers look like they're out for blood. There are about thirty in total, ranging from children to the elderly... but they're all men.

Narissa had paled from the sudden unusual atmosphere, while Phip had positioned himself to shield her from whatever was about to happen.

Regis plopped down onto the floor. Nobles normally only sat in chairs, but he had lived his life up to this point as a commoner and was thus used to these sorts of places. "As you can see, I am completely unarmed. My name is Regis Aurick, and I work as a strategist in the Empire's Fourth Army."

"...I'm Jean Leo, the village chief."

He was much younger than expected—in his early forties, perhaps. While this might not have been young by normal conventions, the man's position as chief

and complaints about his aching back had made Regis expect someone much older. He had darkly tanned skin and sharp eyes, and while he wasn't particularly tall, his chest and arms were incredibly muscular.

Regis spoke as calmly as he could muster. "I am indeed a soldier, but I am not from the navy. As a result, I may not share their thoughts. I can see that some kind of problem has occurred here... If you wouldn't mind, would you tell me what's going on?"

In the past, Regis would have gotten terribly nervous when speaking before so many unfamiliar people. But it seemed that he had grown at least a little accustomed to it.

The village's elders glanced at one another. Regis already had a general idea of what they were planning, which was why he needed to get to the bottom of what was causing their discontentment as soon as possible. He also knew that allowing them time to discuss matters would only bring them further and further from a peaceful resolution, and so, without waiting for a response, he continued.

"Come to think of it, it should be around a month now since the navy arrived. I'm sure that you all have your share of troubles. Have you received your reparation payments yet?"

"What reparations?" the chief asked, showing immediate interest in Regis's words.

"Whenever the military borrows houses and goods, seizes food, or demands labor, it provides a reasonable amount of monetary compensation."

"We didn't receive anything like that."

"In that case, allow me to expedite the process. No need to worry; you'll all receive your dues."

The villagers quickly began exchanging words. Their menacing aura from just moments ago had eased a little, and this time, Regis waited to see what they had to say.

Eventually, the village chief corrected his posture. "So you agree to pay us, Soldier. Correct?"

“That much is only proper procedure.”

It seemed that a civil conversation was finally an option. Regis held back a sigh of relief. *Had this been an incident that couldn't be resolved with money—say the naval officers were being violent toward the villagers, for example—then they wouldn't have accepted financial compensation. Thankfully, the situation hasn't grown that dire.*

“These western parts have fallen under the jurisdiction of the Fourth Army,” Regis continued. “Our commander is Lieutenant General Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. Perhaps you've heard of her? She's the fourth princess of the Empire.”

“Yes, I've heard the name.”

“Her many achievements were finally recognized, and she was appointed to her military position by General Latrielle just the other day. The princess is wise and impartial, so if anyone has any complaints, just bring them to her. I can assure you that she will thoroughly look into each and every matter.”

Regis had told a slight lie there; the person looking into their grievances would probably be him. *Which means even more paperwork...* he sighed internally.



The next day, at a little past noon—

Regis had Narissa and Phip take him out on the boat again, during which he finished up all the preliminary research he needed. When they returned to the beach, the village had been surrounded by imperial soldiers as though it were being besieged. Their banners were green, emblazoned with white shields.

“It looks like the princess has arrived.”

“Thank the Lord!” Abidal-Evra exclaimed, giving a gleeful nod. He must have been anxious, having only a few colleagues with him in unfamiliar territory.

Once the boat's bow had touched the sand, Phip jumped down with a rope. He raced off and fastened it to a bollard on the embankment.

Regis had brought the necessary tools to take measurements this time, so he had some work to do unloading them from the fishing boat. Once that was done, he started climbing down himself. He was the last one off of the boat, and the only one who was still suffering from seasickness.

Narissa offered him a hand. "C'mon, get a grip! You all right, Jess?"

"Yes, thank you."

Her suntanned hand was slender and soft, yet as strong and sturdy as the branch of a large tree. Regis's feet were finally on land, and while the sand wasn't the most stable ground and his shoes were sinking a little, just the fact that he wasn't swaying about over the ocean gave him a sliver of relief.

He moved to pick up the tools he'd put aside, but Narissa got to them first. "I'll carry 'em for you. You're still seasick, yeah?"

"Haha... I'm better than yesterday, but... thanks."

"What're you gonna do now?"

"It looks like the princess is here, so I'll speak to the admiral again. We really do need to initiate our plan soon."

"Err..."

"Hm?" Regis was used to seeing Narissa in high spirits by now, so he was surprised to see her mood suddenly drop. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry 'bout yesterday. Everyone from the village was makin' such scary faces."

"We're probably the ones who should apologize. The country levies its taxes, and for what? Even if we have been invaded by a foreign power, placing such a heavy burden on this village is a reprehensible mismanagement on our part."

"I'm glad you were able to talk 'em down before anything serious happened."

"I really didn't do that much."

"Word is that someone from the military came early this mornin' to discuss payment. The chief and the others said it's a different story if we're gettin' paid for it. They've all been so grouchy lately, so it was nice to see 'em in a good

mood for once!”

“Well, the thing is, the admiral fully intended to pay from the start. His job’s just been so hectic lately that he didn’t have the men to spare to arrange the funds.”

“Even so! It’s all thanks to you!” Narissa chirped, coming up to Regis’s shoulder.

Regis immediately drew back. “Now, now...”

Truth be told, the navy hadn’t planned on paying any reparations.

The previous night, Regis had reported to Lieutenant General Bertram.

“As I’m sure you’re aware... Princess Marie Quatre is a philanthropist who sides with the commoners. She detests it when the country and its nobles exploit the people. If, at the time she takes her post, the village’s houses have been seized without compensation... wouldn’t that ruin your standing, Admiral? Presenting a cordial offering to the villagers would be in your best interest. It’s not a particularly large sum to pay, especially if it means evading the wrath of a royal... As long as things are handled peacefully, I’ll simply report that the village has been properly compensated for its efforts and nothing more.”

As an old-fashioned military man, Bertram was stubborn, but he was no fool. He immediately prepared reparation money for the villagers, even going so far as to offer Regis his thanks for making a proposal that took his standing into such careful consideration.

To Regis, gaining the admiral’s trust was a lot more important than the villagers’ gratitude. The complete cooperation of the western navy would prove indispensable in their attack on High Britannia’s transport ships, and that wasn’t something he could secure through a single letter, no matter whose signature was on it.

However, Narissa didn’t know what was going on behind the scenes, so she continued to be excessively grateful. “You know what? I’ll be honest, Jess—first time I saw you, I thought you looked tiny and unreliable. But you turned out to

be more of a man than I thought!”

“Ha... Haha...”

When Phip returned from putting his tools back on the boat, he seemed quite discontent. “Narissa, quit flirtin’ with the soldier.”

“Huh!? I’m not—! Oh? Hmm? Don’t tell me you’re jealous!”

“Wh-Why would I be jealous!?”

All of a sudden, Abidal-Evra pointed into the distance. “Hey, isn’t that the princess?”

Regis followed his finger to see a large group of knights heading toward them from the village, leaping over the embankment and running down the sandy beach. Racing ahead of them was a young woman with red hair and crimson eyes.

“Regis!”

“Hello again, Alt— Oh.” Regis stopped short, having very nearly called the princess by her usual nickname. He needed to observe proper decorum, at least when in the presence of villagers and knights.

Her guards started pleading “Wait, Princess! Please wait...!” as they chased after her, but it wasn’t long before they fell behind, gasping for air. The fact that Altina was wearing the lightest possible equipment probably played a part in this, but out of everybody in the Fourth Army, Jerome was likely the only one who could keep up with her sprinting at full speed.

By the time Regis had gathered his thoughts, Altina was already right in front of him.

“Regis!”

“Princess. I’m glad to see you’re in good health.” Regis bowed his head in reverence, when Narissa suddenly grabbed onto his arm from beside him. He could feel something soft pushing up against his elbow.

“Who’s the woman, Jess?” she asked.

“Eh!? Th-This esteemed personage is the commander of the Empire’s Fourth

Army, Lieutenant General Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—the highest ranking person in the western army. She is also the fourth princess of the Empire.”

“Nah, what I mean is—who is she to *you*?”

“Me!? Err... The commander I serve?”

“Hah, sounds about right! What was I thinkin’? No way would such an important princess be Jess’s lover! A higher-up at work, eh?”

It seemed that Regis wasn’t the only one surprised by Narissa’s conduct; Altina’s eyes were nearly popping out of their sockets. She was clearly furious, and her voice came out piercingly cold.

“Regis...”

For a moment, he was at a complete loss for words. *She’s angrier than I’ve ever seen her before... Actually, maybe about as angry as she was that time Elenore jokingly kissed me.*

“P-Princess? What’s wrong? Um, this is Narissa. She helped me look into a few things I needed for the operation.”

“Hmm...” Altina’s gaze was ice-cold. Then, out of nowhere, she turned away and walked off without a word.

Regis frantically shook off Narissa’s arm and chased after her. “E-Err... Princess? Are you feeling unwell? Have I done something to displease you? There is much I must report to you with all due haste...”

“That’s right. You only ever talk about work with me!”

“Yes...? Well, if you want to call it that...”

“Clarisse was right about you!”

“A-About what?”

“Oh, nothing! You’re just my strategist, after all! I-It’s not like we’re lovers or anything, so what does it matter what you get up to!? It’s got nothing to do with me! That’s why... That’s why... e-even if you find a... Waaaah... Y-You dummy!”

“Perish the thought! Why, there’s absolutely no way I could ever get a lover! It’s completely impossible! Every drop of water will have drained from the sea before that day comes!”

“Eh!?” Narissa raised her voice. She tried to chase after Regis, but Phip quickly grabbed her by the arm.

“Cut it out already! Seriously!” he chided. His voice was stifled, but harsh. “Speakin’ like that in front of royalty’s already enough to get you taken in for *lèse-majesté*!”

“Wh-What’s that!?”

“Good grief... You really are a brat when it comes to everythin’ but the sea... You were only spared ’cause Princess Marie Quatre is a kind person, but... normally, you’d be on the choppin’ block by now with the way you were actin’.”

“Eep!?”

“We’re just not cut from the same cloth... Commoners like us, and those royals and nobles...”

“That just ain’t...” Narissa trailed off, watching them go with a downtrodden expression.

For a brief moment, Regis was gripped by an urge to turn back. But no matter how attached to him Narissa might have felt, the next place he was headed was the battlefield. They were presumably better off not getting involved any further—after all, he was a soldier in a warzone, and she was a civilian.

And so, Regis never stopped chasing after Altina.



That evening—

The command room that the navy had been using was now the provisional command room of the Empire’s Fourth Army. Little else had changed, however; it was ultimately still the village chief’s house.

Altina sat down on the sofa furthest into the room. Lieutenant General

Bertram, his adjutant, and the ship captains were seated on a sofa to her left, while a terribly displeased-looking Jerome, Abidal-Evra, and the other commanding officers were to her right.

As Altina's advisor, Regis was allowed to stand beside her.

The navy were no longer the only ones carrying out security detail, and with the inclusion of Altina's knights, the house that had never been too spacious to begin with now felt extremely cramped.

With the usual formalities already having been exchanged, Regis took a deep breath. *Now, let's just hope they agree to our plan.*

The authority that Altina had been given by Latrielle meant the navy were obligated to carry out her orders, but unless the admiral—or at the very least his captains—were willing to cooperate, the plan would be much harder to execute. And to make matters worse, given Altina's personality, she was surely opposed to brandishing her newfound power to order people around.

Regis spread a sea chart out on the center table. "There's one thing I want to confirm—when do you think the Poseidam-class will arrive?"

The slow 120-gun ship was on its way from the southern sea, and was due to arrive today.

Bertram wore a somber expression. "Right... It can't pick up any speed without wind. It was supposed to have arrived by sunset according to my contact, but as you can see..."

"Understood. Then we'll have to wait until tomorrow morning. Now about my first proposal—" Regis began, going on to describe his idea.

At first, the attending navy officers were nodding along in agreement, but as the explanation continued, their expressions slowly turned grim.

"Th-That's... Do you have any other suggestions?" Bertram asked with a groan.

"This is the best possible move I can think of. Perhaps I'll have a better plan by tomorrow, but we can't waste time relying on such expectations. If we miss our chance to take on the enemy transport ships, thus allowing High Britannia a

large-scale replenishment, then our capital will fall; the Belgarian Empire will suffer a blow that not even a century could heal.”

“I... see...” Bertram and his men were visibly discouraged.

Even if Belgaria’s capital did end up being taken, that didn’t necessarily mean the Empire would fall apart then and there. They were up against less than twenty thousand soldiers, and the emperor surely wouldn’t accept defeat so easily.

But in the case that the emperor was forced to flee, the surrounding nations would all scramble to be the first to attack, and those living in Belgaria-occupied territories would soon fly the banner of rebellion. It was impossible to imagine the exact extent to which the country would crumble.

Regis lowered his eyes to the chart. “Continuing with my explanation... High Britannia’s 74-gun Princess-class is powered by a triple expansion reciprocating steam engine, and its most defining characteristic is its three-winged screw propeller, which is located at the lower tail end of the hull. I’m sure you all know that these ships can move without wind.”

“We’re well aware, and we know how much trouble that’ll cause.”

“...But that’s also their greatest weakness.”

“Is that so?” Bertram asked, looking somewhat doubtful. “I suppose that screw is their equivalent of our sails, so I’m sure it could serve as a weakness... But that’s not something we can target so easily. The screw is small and submerged underwater. We might have been able to target it on land, but ships constantly shake and sway, even more so when in the midst of a bombardment.”

“So it really will be tough to hit with a cannon... I was right to rule that one out,” Regis mused aloud. “Don’t worry, I have an idea.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“Right away, sir.”

At that, Regis went into further detail. Once the explanation was over, the admiral and his captains, who had been wearing such stern expressions, looked

rather perplexed; it seemed they couldn't decide whether what they'd just heard was hard to believe or just plain hard to accept.

I really don't blame them...

The captains were accustomed to thinking for themselves rather than following orders in battle, so the proposal presented here was completely unlike anything they were used to. What's more, the reality that Regis's achievements as a tactician were limited to battles on land made him no better than a complete greenhorn by naval standards, and when coupled with the fact that he was both younger and of a lower rank than the captains, it was clear that they weren't going to follow his advice that easily.

However, he didn't have the time to gain their trust.

"How does that sound...?" Regis asked.

"Well, I wouldn't say it's impossible..." Bertram replied. And yet, he still couldn't come to a decision.

Altina looked the admiral dead in the eyes. "How about it? Think you can pull off Regis's plan?"

"There's no precedent for this kind of situation, so I can't say for sure."

"Do you think it's worth trying?"

"...Probably."

"We can't afford to underestimate our enemies, nor can we overestimate ourselves. I know there are no absolutes, but even so... I'll do whatever I can for those who are going to die in this battle."

Altina's words were heavier than ever before. Perhaps their last battle had changed something in her heart; while she was still a breathtaking young woman, she now carried an unfathomable intensity.

Bertram made a stern expression and nodded in a show of reverence, thumping his right fist against his left breast in salute. "Orders received with honor. I shall fulfill them to the best of my ability!"

"Thank you. I'm counting on you."

“Yes, ma’am!” Bertram turned to look over the captains—his men, who were surely close to him—and spoke in a kind, remonstrative tone. “Gentlemen, this strategist’s plan is one we have never experienced before. I know you may have your doubts... but then, do we sit and wait for defeat? Is that the way of the proud Belgian Navy?”

“...Admiral, do you think his plan is realistic?” one elderly captain asked.

Bertram shook his head. “Whether it’s realistic or not, I can’t say... But do we have an alternative? I went into the Battle of Touranne believing it would be a certain victory, and, as you are all aware, those expectations were dashed by High Britannia’s steam ship. Wouldn’t you feel ashamed, deciding to stay back and cower in fear just because we were treading into the unknown?”

“Grr... Who says we’re cowering...?” the old captain grumbled half-heartedly, averting his gaze.

Altina pushed harder. “If anyone has an alternative plan, then we’ll gladly hear it out. But if not, as Regis said, we don’t have the time to sit around hoping one will drop into our laps. It’s crucial that we use every second we have working toward what we think is the best course of action in the moment. Our enemy won’t wait for us.”

While the captains seemed anxious, they voiced no further objections. While they were subordinates to their admiral, there was a greater onus on them to act independently compared to soldiers on land.

That makes it all the more reassuring if we can secure their support, but...

A long moment of silence followed until, eventually, one short and rather stout-looking captain stood up. “Gwahaha! Well doesn’t that sound interesting! Those High Britanni-ans won’t know what hit them!”

Then, another captain rose to his feet. And another. Soon, every captain was on his feet giving a firm salute.

“As Her Highness commands. Please include our ships in your plan,” said the old captain who had expressed his doubts just a moment ago, looking quite ashamed of that fact.

Once again, the admiral saluted Altina. “We’ll begin preparations at once!”

The princess's expression softened, and she promptly returned the salute. "Thank you, I'm glad to hear we have your support. It's a pleasure to work with you."



The admiral and his captains exited the room, as did the guards, who were to fortify the outer perimeter. Only Regis, Altina, and Jerome remained.

"Phew..." Altina leaned back into the sofa cushion. "Great. Sounds like they're on board."

"Hah!" Jerome snorted. "Bertram just suffered a crushing defeat, so of course he's going to listen to you. If we win here, he clears his name. If we lose, he can just pin the blame on someone else. You realize you've become the fall guy here, don't you, Regis?" he teased.

Regis shrugged. "And thanks to that, we have their cooperation. If they weren't acting in their own interests, then arguing with them would have taken all day."

Altina knit her brow. "Is this really the time and place to be thinking about accountability?"

"Maybe not. If the Empire ceases to exist entirely, then I think that'll be the least of their worries..." Regis mused. "But there's not much else we can do here. I haven't achieved anything at sea, so it's unreasonable to expect them to trust me out of nowhere."

"Oh! Oh! They'll trust you if your very first plan is a success, though, won't they?"

"Let's hope so..."

"So what's this plan like?" Jerome asked with a mischievous smirk. "Will it succeed?"

"...It will. At least, it will at first."

"Talk about self-confidence."

"Oh, no... I just know a thing or two, that's all. And any confidence I do have won't be in myself. As Altina said, we need to earn the officers' trust. While

there will undoubtedly be some casualties, I chose a plan that will definitely see results.”

To achieve the ultimate objective of this naval battle, they would need to execute more and more dangerous plans henceforth.

Jerome prodded the sea chart. “Well, I have to admit... it’s obviously going to work. After all, this is one of those heinous scams you’re so good at.”

“There’s nothing heinous about it.”

“Pah! Even if the enemies aren’t the only ones falling for it?”

“N-No, that’s...” Regis scratched his head for a moment. “It will ultimately benefit all parties involved.”

Once again, Jerome snorted. “Have it your way. The sea’s all yours. So, am I holding the fort or what? You’re not putting me on a ship, are you?”

“I’d rather you get some rest this time around, if possible... but should the battle end in failure, we’ll have to make some changes.”

“Personally, I don’t like waiting around with nothing to do. If all I’m doing is prancing around on my horse, my skills will rot.”

Altina suddenly sprung up next to Jerome. “Wait, will you be on one of the ships, Regis!?”

“That is my intent. This plan is centered around a naval battle, so it only makes sense for me to stay beside the admiral.”

“Then I’m coming too!”

“Wh-What!?”

“I’ll come, even if you tell me not to! Assuming the naval battle is a success, there’ll be nothing for those of us still on land to do, right? All the more reason to have me aboard!”

“Err, that’s...”

How am I supposed to stop her? Regis wondered. In all the times Altina had made a sudden decision like this, he hadn’t once managed to change her mind.

After thinking for a moment, he slumped his shoulders. “Hah... Can’t say I

didn't see this coming."

While it sometimes didn't seem like it, Altina was thinking about things in her own way, and she acted in accordance with a consistent set of values and beliefs.

"Regis, would you rather I wasn't around?"

"That's not true. They say a cannon's accuracy rate is one in a hundred, so, close-range battles aside, it's not so easy to land a hit during an exchange. But fire a hundred shots, and some are bound to meet their targets... In a battle of swords, I doubt you're going to lose, but there's little you can do when a cannon shell is flying toward you. Please keep that in mind."

"I know that already."

"Also, on a ship, you have to obey the captain no matter what. And the admiral will be the one commanding the fleet, not you. If you don't like that, you do have the authority to change the captain or admiral, but only one person can be allowed to order the sailors at a time. Understood?"

"Yep! Promise!"

"Well... Personally, I'd rather you stayed on land. One wrong move, and we'll be surrounded by three 74-gun ships—two hundred and twenty-two cannons bombarding us from all sides."

"Then don't make any wrong moves!"

"Ha... Haha..."

"Now that I think about it, Regis—do you have the skills to be a captain? I'm sure you've read the right books."

"...I get seasick."

"That so?"

"What about you?"

"I've only ever ridden a rowboat out on a lake."

"Same here until recently, and let me tell you, it's a completely different beast. Oh, but a warship should be more stable than a fishing boat, so I imagine

you'd be less likely to get seasick... Incidentally, the sailors will definitely laugh if their princess is taken out by seasickness. Are you prepared for that?"

"...I'm more worried about that than the cannons," Altina admitted, finally showing some weakness.

Jerome made a face as if to say "good grief," then swiped a bottle of wine from the cupboard. "Well, you two have fun getting nauseated. Me? I'll manage that in my own way."

Chapter 3: All Ships, Full Broadside... Fire!

The sailors left town to begin preparations, vacating the houses they had occupied. This was normally when they would have been returned to the villagers, but over the course of a campaign that spanned the entire Empire, the soldiers who had just arrived from Fort Volks had reached their limit. Their regiment was by no means in fighting condition—so much so that many had needed to stay behind at Fort Letroisti—but having the willing cooperation of the villagers meant that those who had made the journey to Hugovie could at least rent and rest in houses for the night.

When morning came and Regis's plan was put into action, most of the troops would be heading back to Fort Letroisti under Jerome's command.

It was around nine in the evening as Regis lay on a borrowed bed in the room he'd been provided. After answering the navy's questions and discussing matters with Jerome, he'd realized the day was already over. His only light source was a single candle—a rather low-quality one, at that. It wasn't quite as bright as he had hoped, though it wasn't bad enough that he couldn't see what was right in front of him.

"Now then..." Regis muttered, producing a book from his supplies. They had stopped at a large town on the long march from the capital, and he had used this opportunity to buy something new.

In the book, the protagonists, trapped in the world of a game, go on an adventure to save a young girl who is being targeted by villains. When it came to adventure works, it was standard fare to have the main character be a skilled swordsman—someone like Duke Eddie, for example, who was currently looking after Fort Volks. However, the primary protagonist of this work was a strange boy who cast support magic to aid his comrades, and—

Whenever Regis read an interesting book, the surrounding noises grew distant, and the very world itself seemed to fade away to the point that he could hardly tell where he was anymore.

“Yep, this is what I’m living for...” he said blissfully.

“Aren’t you supposed to leave at daybreak...?”

“That’s right. I’ll need time to board the boat, so I’m going to get up while it’s still dark.”

Just before dawn, the room would be even darker than the moonlit streets—so dark that it wouldn’t make a difference whether his eyes were open or closed. Sure, he could always rely on muscle memory and try to light a candle, but that would be tough to do in an unfamiliar room. That was why he had already changed clothes, placed his belongings together beside the bed, and memorized where the exit was. This way, he would be able to leave even when he couldn’t see a thing.

“I’m perfectly prepared...” Regis continued. “Wait, Ms. Clarisse!?”

The next thing he knew, there was a woman in a green dress and white apron standing before him. It was Clarisse. He apparently hadn’t noticed her come in.

“I see you haven’t changed, Mr. Regis,” she said with a sigh.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Do you need something? Is Altina calling for me?”

“The princess has an early day tomorrow, so she is already asleep. Shouldn’t you be sleeping too?”

“I do intend to sleep, of course; sleep deprivation would only make my seasickness worse. But I just had to read a bit of what came next, otherwise...”

Clarisse gave a warm, gentle smile. “I see, I see.”

Yes, I know she’s speaking out of consideration, but at this rate, she’s going to take the candle away again.

“Err... If I don’t read this next part, I’ll be so bothered that I won’t be able to sleep.”

“Your eyes are red.”

“They sting a little, I’ll admit, but I think that’s because I’m not used to the salty air. At the very least, let me get to the point where they escape the dungeons...”

“Very well, then. I’ll read to you. That should at least give your body and eyes some rest.”

“Huh!?”

“Unless you’d rather just go to sleep,” Clarisse said, reaching for the candlestick.

“Oh, no, no, no! Then, um... please go ahead.”

“Certainly.”

Clarisse picked the book up from beside Regis’s pillow, looking a little pleased as she did so. The bed creaked ever so slightly as she sat on its edge.

“Fufufu... If the princess were to see us now, do you think she’d misunderstand?”

“Misunderstand what?”

“Oh, nothing... Now close your eyes, Mr. Regis. Why should I read if you’re just going to look at me?”

Shadows danced around Clarisse’s face and body as the candle’s flame flickered. The faint light made every soft contour stand out even more, elevating her beauty to an alluring degree. Looking at the maid from such an unfamiliar angle, Regis was overcome by a peculiar sensation. As he lay there in bed with her sitting right beside him, the faint scent of tea ensnared his senses, and he could feel himself getting caught up in her hazel eyes.

Regis felt a sudden tightness in his chest. His heart was starting to race, and while he was doing nothing more than lying there, he soon found himself struggling to breathe.

Clarisse averted her eyes, her cheeks teasingly flushed. “It’s embarrassing when you stare at me so closely...”

“Oh... I-I’m sorry. You look so beautiful that I just couldn’t help myself...”

“Eh?” Her eyes widened, and Regis immediately clasped a hand over his mouth.

“Wh-What am I saying!?”

“Mn... You’re not supposed to... say things like that, okay?”

“You’re right. I intended it as a compliment, but nothing good will ever come of someone like me judging a woman’s outer appearance...”

“No, that’s not what I meant at all... Mr. Regis, if you say something like that to me now of all times, I’ll be ruined. Do you understand?”

“I don’t...”

“Tomorrow is an important day, so... not now. Please close your eyes.”

At that, Clarisse placed a hand over Regis’s eyes. Her touch was soft, pleasantly cool, and carried a gentle fragrance. He closed his eyes as instructed.

Then Clarisse began to read. She was whispering so that only Regis could hear, yet her words were clear, vibrant, and pleasant to the ears. In fact, Regis could find no fault in the technical aspects at all; her pronunciation and intonation were both flawless. What came across most clearly, however, was that she was reading just for him, and how wonderful of a feeling that was.

Regis had read that there once used to be minstrels in the imperial court, though the current emperor had decided not to keep them. That said, there were still some among the nobles who hired professional storytellers to read them to sleep, and this was the first time that Regis had come across a noble’s wasteful pastime that he fully endorsed. This truly was a moment of pure bliss.



Early the next morning—

It was still dark out, and the sky was dotted with stars.

“Under Latrielle’s orders, the troops here are all part of the Empire’s Fourth Army, but... things could get complicated with both land and sea troops, so we might have to differentiate them.”

Altina tilted her head. “Since Lieutenant General Bertram’s the admiral, we’ll just call his units ‘the Bertram Fleet.’”

“Good heavens, no!” Bertram exclaimed, shaking his head. “You are the

commander, Your Highness. And what's more, you will be riding aboard our flagship. If anything, 'the Marie Quatre Argentina Fleet' would be more appropriate."

This was a statement that Regis endorsed. "Even with the admiral taking command of naval battles, it's hard to say something like 'Bertram Fleet, move out!' when the princess is right there."

"I really don't mind."

"Please have mercy, Your Highness. I'll be the laughingstock of my men."

"But my name's way too long. How about we meet in the middle and go with 'the Regis Fleet'?"

"Absolutely not!" Regis interjected. *How on earth is that meeting in the middle?*

And yet Bertram, of all people, seemed to approve. "That sounds fine to me. It's an adequate name for this operation, at least."

"Please give me a break..." Regis sighed. "Let's go with 'the Western Liberation Fleet' and call it a day. After all, our goal is to fight off High Britannia's transport ships and retake Port Ciennbourg."

Bertram nodded. "A splendid name with clear intent."

"Well, if you say so," Altina conceded.

And that was the end of that matter.

Mooring something as large as a warship required a port where the water was considerably deep. Naturally, the fishing village was inadequately suited to that task, so they had opted for a slightly more time-consuming workaround; the ships would drop anchor offshore, then the troops would be transported over to them via smaller vessels.

Regis's guards saw him off as he boarded the ferry boat from the harbor. Altina was the only person from the east accompanying him, and she had no guards with her. This time, they would be by themselves. Not even Clarisse was tagging along. She had said her goodbyes back at the house, acting as calm as ever and still making her usual jokes.

Abidal-Evra, among others, had asserted that Regis and Altina needed guards with them no matter what, but a ship of the line was not a passenger vessel; it could not afford to carry those who would be useless to the operation. What's more, a guard knight served no purpose in an exchange of cannon fire.

Even if the navy was secretly plotting against them, a few guards would hardly make a difference. Their only option was to trust the sailors, and if anything happened, then it was Altina's blunder for insisting on riding the same ship as them.

Altina hopped aboard the boat so nimbly that it was hard to believe this was her first time. In fact, she even helped Regis up when he was about to fall backward.

Back and forth the little boat swayed. Robust men of the sea called to one another as they started rowing, propelling the vessel away from the jetty.

Regis could see the land shrinking behind them. He had been out to sea twice over the past two days, but knowing that he was finally going into battle made the thought of leaving the shore so strangely disheartening.

The moon and stars lingered overhead. The sky was frightfully clear.

On a whim, Regis looked over at the embankment. The white tips of the eastern mountains were finally emerging from the darkness.

"Ah..."

A small figure was standing atop the embankment, its back to the brightening sky. It was only a silhouette, but Regis immediately recognized it. The girl with sun-bleached red hair, Narissa, was staring in his direction. Not that she could possibly see him from where she was.

"Thank you for your assistance..." Regis whispered to himself. "We shall protect this country, so please, take care..."



Imperial Year 851, June 1st—

Numbering forty-four ships in total, the Western Liberation Fleet departed

from the small fishing village of Hugovie. Its firepower primarily came from its nine 80-gun Aeterna-class ships, followed by fourteen smaller 50-gun Sererne-classes, and twenty even smaller 14-gun Urathenos-classes.

The Aeterna-class fell short of the enemy's 74-gun Princess-class steam ship in both speed and firepower, but it was still capable of exchanging blows. It spanned 120 cubits (53 m) from bow to stern, was 34 cubits (15 m) wide, and had a main mast that was 140 cubits (62 m) tall.

Since Belgaria had the numerical advantage, it would be possible to challenge the enemy to a decisive battle, so long as they powered through any losses. That said, they still needed enough troops to endure the rest of the war, as well as any potential engagements with the surrounding countries, so these losses couldn't be written off entirely.

The Sererne-class was a ship made with the intention of preserving order in territorial waters, putting it one level beneath a warship. As it would usually be cracking down on armed pirate or smuggler ships, it was only 80 cubits (36 m) long and its cannons were mostly small to mid-sized. Its armoring was also relatively thin, which meant it would struggle to exchange shots with any vessel from High Britannia.

The Urathenos-class ships were 45 cubits (20 m) in length, less than half that of the navy's flagship. While they could potentially travel faster than a Princess-class, this largely depended on the wind, and they could not be expected to withstand a bombardment.

Leading this fleet was a single heavily armored 120-gun Poseidam-class, which was 160 cubits (71 m) long with an overall width of 45 cubits (20 m). The imperial navy possessed two of these powerful ships, but only one would be usable in this battle—namely the 2nd Poseidam. This wasn't a decision that had been made to cut costs; the 1st Poseidam was simply still undergoing maintenance.

Mending and maintaining a ship took time, which was why the military always made at least two of any model. This way, there was always at least one ready to send to the front lines. Having a third was considered ideal where possible, as it could be used for practice purposes.

Each model of ship had its own particular uses, and any new recruit would need to know his duties in advance to avoid causing confusion on board. There was no time to pick up new skills on the battlefield, however, so there was a limit to what these new sailors could learn about the ships they did not work on.

The 3rd Poseidam was currently under construction, but... *If this operation goes well, they might give up on it*, Regis thought.

Not counted in the fleet's numbers were ferry boats like the ones transporting the troops, as well as other small reconnaissance boats. While they served important roles, they could not really be considered a part of the fighting force.

Regis and Altina boarded the third Aeterna-class, a ship called the Frantam.

The helm was above deck no matter the ship, on a raised platform called the quarterdeck located near the rear of the vessel. That was where one could find the all-important steering wheel, controlled by a helmsman who, like the other soldiers, followed the instructions of the captain.

The admiral was not part of the crew of any particular ship. His job was to observe and take command over the fleet as a whole, and his directives would be conveyed to the other ships via flag signals.

"Shall we set sail, Princess?" Bertram sought confirmation.

Altina nodded. "The outcome of this battle will change the fate of Belgaria. It's in your hands now."

"I'll keep that in mind," Bertram said, taking a deep breath and straightening his hat. Then, he thrust out his right hand. "Western Liberation Fleet, move out!"

As it was still too dark to use flag signals, this message was sent via oil lamps. The captain of the flagship was the first to receive the message, which he immediately passed on to the crew. In no time at all, the ship started moving forward.

The fleet was traveling in a different formation than they would employ in combat. When sailing through the darkness, the flagship would take the lead,

with the other ships using lamps to show their positions. There was one lamp in the crow's nest, one at the stern, and one on both the port and starboard sides, which allowed others to determine the ship's size and distance.

It could prove quite troublesome if these lights were put out, as the lamps were nearly impossible to reignite in the sea breeze. Luckily, there was no such incident as the fleet departed from the fishing village and made its way toward Port Ciennbourg.

As the sky started to brighten to the east, Altina looked around restlessly. "The ships are a lot bigger than I'd thought when I saw them from a distance!"

"Well, the Aeterna-class is the second largest ship in the Empire's possession," Regis noted.

The stretch from the bow to the stern seemed like an endless expanse of wooden planks. It was rare to see anything so vast, even in a noble's estate. In terms of size, this was practically a sector of a fortress.

The masts rose high enough to pierce the heavens and were strung with a great many lines of rope, while the sails were so large that it was impossible to take them all in at once. Close to five hundred sailors were aboard this fortress moving across the sea—the scale of a small village.

Bertram was the expert when it came to all things ship and sea-related, but he was busy giving his undivided attention to the various detailed reports coming in.

"Admiral! Jeanvier is trailing behind!"

It seemed that one of the Urathenos-classes was unable to keep up with the rest of the fleet. The ships hadn't received any proper maintenance at a port since the Battle of Touranne, and there were certain damages that couldn't be repaired out on the water.

"...Tell him not to strain the ship. Have him change course to the third rendezvous point."

"À vos ordres!"

Bertram seemed incredibly busy. Deciding not to get in his way, Regis struck

up a conversation with Altina.

“Is something bothering you?”

“How does that wooden loop change where the ship is going?”

“Oh, the steering wheel is connected to a rudder beneath the ship. You change the tension and orientation of the sails in accordance with the wind, then move the rudder to change the ship’s direction.”

“So this large ship is actually being turned by that small wheel!?”

“That’s why you apparently need quite a bit of muscle to turn it when the sea’s rough. And it’s not as though turning it is all you have to do.”

Aeterna-class ships had three masts, and the steering wheel was located between the rearmost mast and the stern, with a handrail placed between it and where the admiral stood. Regis and Altina were standing a little further away so that their conversation wouldn’t bother anyone.

The ship was wider than either of them had anticipated. Toward the stern of the ship behind them was the highest point on the ship—a cabin area where the meeting room, as well as the private rooms of the admiral and ship’s captain, were located.

Indeed, the Frantam was the Western Liberation Fleet’s flagship for a reason—it even had a guest room for visiting nobles, which had been allotted to Altina this time around.

Come to think of it, I was never told where I was supposed to sleep... Probably below deck with the other sailors.

Sailors did not get their own beds, and instead slept beside the cannons or between cargo with a blanket wrapped around them. At best, some would sleep in hammocks hung from the ceiling.

Let’s hope I get my own blanket, at least... Regis thought. But that wouldn’t matter if they didn’t survive the day’s battle.

The sky was bright overhead.



A wave of the flags promptly sent the signal to all ships. Racing past the Poseidam at the vanguard, the flagship Frantam led the charge. Only five Aeterna-classes accompanied them—six ships in total out of forty-four—but in essence, this could be considered more than half of their fighting force. That said, this did not mean that the remaining ships could take a break; they each moved to their respective stations.

It was around this time that a report came in from the recon ship they had sent ahead. The adjutant, who received the notice, conveyed it to the admiral.

“Confirmation on the number of enemy ships in port! Eighteen transport ships! Six Princess-class vessels! More than forty assorted smaller crafts!”

“What!?” Bertram cried out in dismay. The sailors working on deck were in an uproar, and the ship’s captain looked flustered.

Why does nothing ever go as planned? Regis thought, watching from a short distance away. That was when he noticed Bertram glancing at him. *Is he seeking my opinion as a strategist?* His adjutant, the captain, and the surrounding sailors were similarly looking his way with anxious expressions.

Regis shrugged. “...So it seems their convoy arrived. They weren’t there yesterday afternoon, so they must have shown up last night. That said... we were already anticipating these numbers, so there is no need for concern.”

“Oh? You had a way of guessing when they would reach the port?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I simply expected that we’d be going up against the same numbers that were reported in the Battle of Touranne.”

Bertram gave a nod. “I see.”

Aside from Regis himself, Altina was the only one whose composure hadn’t wavered in the slightest. “I believe in Regis, you know!”

As happy as he was to hear that, Regis believed it was also a rather risky statement to make. He lowered his voice so that only she could hear. “...I know I shouldn’t be the one to say this, but... isn’t it dangerous to place that much trust in me?”

“Ahahah, I’m not that much of a fool. One look at your face and I can tell

whether this is a situation you've already considered, or whether it's unanticipated trouble. That's all there is to it."

"...I see. In that case, I should stay well away from poker."

"Fufufu. How about a game sometime?"

"Are you any good?"

"I'm only offering because I reckon this'll be my one and only chance to actually win at it," Altina said with a bitter smile, leading Regis to chuckle himself.

Bertram took in this exchange, aghast. *They're not anxious at all...!? he thought to himself. This was a state of emergency in which the enemy's forces were double what had been discussed, yet this young tactician and his much-too-young commander weren't the least bit nervous or hesitant.*

His adjutant looked equally perplexed. "Perhaps this means... he simply has that much confidence in his plan?"

"R-Right." Bertram feebly nodded. *Let us pray that is the case. Could it be that he just doesn't understand what it means to fight on the sea?*

There was no end to Bertram's concerns, but as things stood, they were one step away from an artillery bombardment. As the admiral, to express any apprehension right now would be foolhardy. Instead, he addressed the commander once more to be certain.

"The enemy's forces have doubled... Are you certain we should give the attack order?"

"Yes, of course! We're taking Ciennbourg back!" Altina declared, pointing at the approaching cape. It jutted out into the sea like a spear and was covered with tall trees that blocked their vision, but Port Ciennbourg certainly lay just beyond it. There had once been a watchtower that also served as a lighthouse in that forest, but it was still in ruins from High Britannia's initial attack.



The port rested at the innermost point of a V-shaped inlet. As the legend went, it was here that *L'Empereur Flamme* offered up a sword as he prayed for victory in the war that founded the nation, and the inlet henceforth became known as Épée Prière Bay. According to the recon reports, there were eighteen large-scale freight ships moored within, alongside six Princess-class warships.

While the bay was vast enough for an exchange of cannon fire to be possible, this was not recommended. As it was contained by land on three sides, the wind was much weaker inside the inlet, which would in turn lower the speed of all sailing ships.

Meanwhile, the enemy's ships could move faster in calmer seas. How could the Empire be expected to compete in a race where only their ships were at a disadvantage, dragging along as though they were moving through a bog?

But the enemy fleet was at the innermost point of the inlet; it would be impossible for Belgaria to retake Ciennbourg without going in themselves.

The Frantam took the lead, the other ships following behind in a single column as they entered the jaws of certain doom.

"Enemy ships spotted!" came a voice from the crow's nest. Not that there was any need; everyone on the quarterdeck could see them clearly.

Just as reported, there were around twenty large ships around the port, surrounded by countless smaller vessels. Their opponent was no fool, however; High Britannia must have had scouts posted around the entrance of the bay, as their warships were already approaching.

They already know we're here, Bertram noted as he saw the black smoke billowing from the Princess-classes' smokestacks.

This was the first time that Regis had ever seen a real steam ship. It was the ship of a new era—one that, up to that point, he had only ever read about in books.

Its fundamental structure was no different from the old ships of the line: its tall hull was made of wood and lined with gun ports, and, despite being a steam ship, it sported three masts so that it could serve as a sailing ship when needed.

Altina tilted her head. “Regis... Are those steam ships? They have sails.”

“The Princess-class is a so-called motorized sailboat. It’s been equipped to use both sails and steam power.”

Warships that depended purely on steam power had yet to take the stage. While they were being prototyped, warships in particular needed to take damage and engine failure into account. When the wind was strong on the open seas, there were times when spreading the sails would be faster.

“Hm. They have both? That seems so unfair!”

“They wouldn’t equip something so heavy, large, and expensive to a ship that burns through valuable coal unless it gave them a considerable advantage.”

There was a small chimney emitting black smoke between each Princess-class’s first and second masts. Before the steam engine could be used, it would need to burn coal until enough pressure had built up in the boiler. But it seemed those preparatory stages had already been taken care of, and the enemy was already prepared for battle.

The enemy ships came closer still. *They’re naturally not going to let us get any closer to the freight ships*, Regis thought.

“Prepare for battle!” Bertram ordered.

His adjutant loudly relayed the command, at which point the captain and his sailors readied the cannons. A messenger waved their flags, signaling for the other ships to open their gun ports as well.

It was standard for each individual cannon to be operated by two artillery soldiers, while a third was tasked with carrying the gunpowder from storage.

The main cannons on the Aeterna-class were the super-sized ones designed specifically for imperial warships. As they were frontloaded, a pouch of gunpowder had to be inserted down the muzzle, followed by the cannon shell. A thin needle was then jabbed through a vent at the back to puncture the pouch, and once it was removed, the vent was topped up with gunpowder and the loading process was complete. From there, the artillery soldiers held their aim so that they were ready to fire the instant the order came.

These cannons were not attached to the lower deck, and instead rested on four-wheeled gun carriages which were connected to the ship by chain. This degree of freedom not only granted them finer horizontal alignment, but also allowed the carriage to jerk back when the cannon was fired, consequently absorbing some of the recoil. There were also disadvantages, however; for one, the seas were rough during a bombardment, so there were times when a movable carriage made it hard to aim.

As for igniting the fuse, this was done using flint, just as one would on land.

The enemy ships approached.

Princess-classes had a range of roughly 45 arpents (3216 m), while Aeterna-classes could only shoot 38 arpents (2715 m). However, while the difference between them was clear, ships didn't yet have the proper technology to accurately gauge such long distances. While each one had a surveyor, they weren't known to be too accurate, so it ultimately came down to the admiral's instincts.

The rudders of the Princess-classes turned to the right.

"Admiral, the enemy turns starboard!"

The enemy was showing their left flank. This would be considered a weakness in a clash between animals, but the opposite was true when it came to ships; the flank of a ship was covered with lines upon lines of weapons.

Altina cocked her head. "Aren't we going to get hit like this?"

"...Most likely."

No sooner had Regis muttered that than the enemy ships' port sides were swallowed in black smoke. It took a moment for the thunderous rumble to reach, and while there was still a considerable distance between them, it was a sound that strangled the heart and made goosebumps rise on the skin.

We're still too far away, Regis thought. But even if the Princess-classes had longer range, targets became harder to hit the farther away they were. Their shells could hardly be expected to connect at this distance, but while Regis knew that in his head, he could still feel his knees giving way.

“...!”

Countless cannon shells soared through the sky, coming not from the front, but nearly directly overhead. Air resistance had caused the shells to lose their horizontal velocity, making them come down at a far steeper angle than they had been fired from.

They assailed the Frantam, one shell grazing the sail before smacking down into the sea. A spray of water rose from its surface, rising even higher than the tallest mast. As the waves tossed the massive ship around, it bobbed and shook as though it were a fallen leaf.

“Urk! Urgh...” The most Regis could do was grab the handrail. *I doubt Altina’s faring any better...*

Or so he thought. The princess was standing calmly on the deck, having not lost her balance in the slightest. “Why aren’t we returning fire!?”

“Well, that’s probably because... we’re too far away...”

At that, a second volley came flying overhead. *They reload quick!* Regis closed his eyes and prayed to God. That was all he could do for now.

The sea shook and the sky itself seemed to tremble under the cannons’ roars. Spouts of water scattered all over the deck like salty rain, and as the ship swayed, Regis felt he would be shaken overboard.

“Whoa!”

“One ship’s been done in!”

Hearing Altina’s voice, Regis wiped the seawater from his face, only to be assailed by a stinging pain the moment he opened his eyes. “Ow!?”

Had seawater gotten into his eyes? It hurt so badly that, for a moment, he thought he was injured. There was a salty taste in his mouth, and his nose was running uncontrollably.

Regis’s experience from his academy training meant that he didn’t hesitate much in a land battle, but this was his first naval battle, and it was far worse than what he had imagined while reading his books. Perhaps that went without saying—they would never tell the pathetic tale of a navy hero who lamented

the pain of seawater getting in his eyes.

After rubbing his eyes hard, Regis opened them to see that Altina wasn't beside him anymore. *She didn't fall overboard, did she!?* For a moment, everything went black, but then a voice came from above. The thought that he was being called to heaven briefly crossed his mind, but he knew that couldn't be the case.

"Regis! A ship's on fire!"

He looked toward the voice to see Altina staring out behind the ship from atop the poop deck. She had scaled it as easily as one might climb a set of stairs, even with the ship swaying so violently that Regis was being tossed every which way. It was like she was completely unaffected by her surroundings—like she alone was standing on dry land.

It was equally possible that Regis was just being dramatic. *No, that can't be it—even the sailors are grabbing onto the rails, and they're secured with lifelines.*

"Hup!" Altina jumped down.

"Wha—!? What were you planning to do if you fell into the sea!?" Regis exclaimed.

"Not important. That ship over there's on fire!"

"...Of course. It's made of wood, so if struck by an iron ball heated by a burst of gunpowder, it's quite likely to catch fire."

"But there are people on board!"

Naval battles had a higher death rate than land battles, as there was little one could do in the midst of a bombardment. But Regis knew that Altina would definitely not be satisfied with such an explanation.

"...The water shouldn't be too cold this time of year. If the sailors fall into the sea, they should be able to hold out for six hours or so. And as long as they can swim to the mouth of the bay, the other ships will come and pick them—Uwoap!?"

Another near impact raised a splash that doused him in seawater.

"Ah!" Altina gasped, grabbing onto the handrail for the first time.

The next instant, the bow of the Frantam crumbled. The tremors, the sounds—it was as though they had been struck by lightning. It was completely unlike being rocked by the waves, and Regis was suddenly thrown into the air as if someone had kicked him in the chest. For a moment, he accepted that he was about to die. That is, until someone grabbed him by the arm and dragged him back down to the deck.

“Regis!? You should always hold on to the handrail when the boat shakes!”

When it shakes? It’s been shaking this whole time... Don’t tell me it doesn’t even register to her unless we take a direct hit? Regis’s heart was pounding, and his breathing was all over the place. It was a moment of sheer terror.

“Hah... Hah... Th-Thank... you...”

“Are you okay, Regis?”

“Y-Yeah... How did you know we were going to get hit?”

“How? Why, because I saw the cannonball coming toward us, of course.”

“...Is that so?”

While the shells did move slowly enough to be followed with the naked eye, a normal person wouldn’t be able to distinguish between what would be a hit and what a close miss.

The boat shook again. This time, a cannonball had grazed the sail.

Altina had taken Regis in her arms, holding him so close that their foreheads were touching. She was drenched in seawater, which just seemed to make her glimmer even more than usual. And despite the grim expression on her face, she gave off a misplaced aura of enchantment.

She whispered into his ear. “We can win this, right?”

“...That depends on how capable Admiral Bertram is, I suppose.”

“How are things looking now!?”

“...About as expected.”

That was when the admiral made his call. “Flagship, starboard!”

“*À vos ordres!* Starboard!” the captain echoed, giving the order before the

adjutant even had a chance to speak. The helmsman was already turning the wheel.

Under the adjutant's command, the signal flags flying from the mast were changed. The new order: "All ships, follow me."

At that, the Belgianian fleet all started to expose their port sides, just as the High Britannian ships had done. They were moving parallel to their opponent but in the opposite direction, and would exchange fire as they passed—this was what was known as a passing engagement. The distance between them was now around half of what it had been when the enemy first opened fire.

Regis nodded. So far, everything was going as planned. "We'll only be able to exchange a few shots as we pass by, but that should also reduce the number of times we get shot at."

"Will our few shots be able to reach them?"

"...I don't know about that."

Had the admiral instead decided to turn left, the fleet would have been traveling in the same direction as the enemy—a prolonged engagement. Unlike in a brief, passing exchange, the two sides would end up firing round upon round at one another, and to a cannoneer, an enemy matching pace was practically stationary.

In a prolonged engagement, the difference in firepower was more evident than ever. Given the intent of the plan, turning right was surely the right option.

With the Empire's line of battle finally facing its broadside cannons toward the enemy, Bertram thrust out his hand. "All ships, full broadside! *Feu!*"

It was time for the counterattack—the first imperial shots of the battle.

A different tremor from before rocked the hull, this time echoing from down below. The port side facing the enemy was suddenly caught up in black smoke, cutting off all sight, and the scent of gunpowder filled the air. Regis found it hard to breathe, and his eyes stung so much that he could hardly see.

Since they were out at sea, the strong winds quickly carried away the smoke. Regis's vision soon cleared up, and the first thing he saw was Altina,

discontentedly pursing her lips.

“Not a single one hit!” she exclaimed.

“The first shots are more for observation purposes.”

“How are we supposed to observe anything through all that smoke?”

“That’s what the lookouts are for.”

Both Regis and Altina looked up at the mast. Even the black smoke that had covered the entirety of the ship didn’t reach as far as the crow’s nest up top; lookouts would be able to observe the result of the bombardment with relative ease, using flags to signal whether they were aiming too near or far. A messenger above deck would then pass this information on to the sailors on the gun deck. Information transmission on a warship was fundamentally carried out by such messengers running back and forth.

Before the Belgianian fleet could ready their next round, they were subject to another volley of cannon fire. It seemed the captain was quite used to this situation; by sailing in a zig-zag pattern he prevented the enemy from gauging their proper distance, and he didn’t dare lose focus in case the ship started traveling along a straight path.

Finally, the second round was ready. While some shells made contact this time, they were still unable to achieve any considerable gains. There was little need for the steam ships to have many sailors above deck; they were not using their masts or sails, so breaking them served no purpose; and thanks to the powerful propulsion of the steam engine, the deck and hull could be made thicker without needing to worry as much about weight.

With the Princess-classes’ sturdy armor, these shots were barely effective, and any spots that caught fire were all too quickly extinguished. In an artillery battle, the probability of a shell making contact was one in a hundred. The probability of that impact being effective was one in ten.

Altina squinted as the smoke cleared. “It doesn’t look like it’s working...”

“I mean, I’m not going to complain if we get a lucky hit in, but... if we could take them in an upfront exchange, then we wouldn’t have needed a plan in the first place.”

“You have a point.”

They were at a clear disadvantage when it came to firepower. If things carried on as they were, ally damages would continue to mount up.

“Consort ship Feuille is down!” came a voice from the crow’s nest. That was the second allied ship they had lost. Both were Aeterna-classes.

After a brief silence, Admiral Bertram gave another order. “Full turn, starboard! Pull away from the enemy and head south of the bay!”

“Yes, sir!”

Their artillery exchange in the bay had made the difference in combat ability painfully obvious.

“Were you expecting this?” Altina whispered to Regis.

“...To be honest, I didn’t expect the gap to be quite this large. Their firepower, speed, and whatnot are about what I was expecting... but who’d have thought their armor would be such a cut above?”

“I... see.” While the concern on her face was palpable, Altina chose not to voice her anxieties.

“Don’t worry,” Regis said, attempting to reassure her. “This is where it really begins.”

Six Aeterna-classes had initially taken the vanguard of the Western Liberation Fleet, two of which were now out of action. The sailors dived into the sea one after another as flames engulfed their ships, culminating in two massive explosions as their gunpowder supplies ignited, scattering shrapnel quite some distance. The blasts then gave way to a tremendous whirlpool that began to slowly drag the wreckage down into the depths, so the sailors who had abandoned ship needed to swim quite some distance to be out of harm’s reach.

They had neither the time nor the manpower to save them. Allied ships could still make it to the mouth of the bay, so all Regis could do was pray that they could swim that far.

The remaining four Aeterna-classes took a hard right to escape from their passing engagement, skillfully maneuvering despite the limited wind. Once they

had distanced themselves from the enemy fleet, rather than heading out the way they'd come, they moved to the side of the bay.

Meanwhile, the six enemy Princess-class ships turned their rudders to the right.

Altina pointed at them. "Are they returning to port?"

"I'm sure they want to chase us, but the convoy they're supposed to protect is close by. They'll start by securing the harbor."

Had the opposing admiral been the type to fixate on the prey before his eyes, he surely would have moved to the mouth to block their escape. But in that case, the Empire's ships could have simply turned back around and assailed the transport ships with artillery fire, achieving massive gains in the process.

They're not going to make this easy, are they? Regis thought, recalling the battle of La Frengé just a few days prior. The one commanding the High Britannian army was Colonel Oswald Coulthard, and while Regis had never met the man personally, he was certain he would have entrusted the protection of their transport ships to a competent admiral.

"Regis, they've set up a line between us and the port!" Altina shouted. "And they're closing in on us!"

"Yeah... They *are* faster than us, after all. And the wind's pretty weak in the bay..."

"Did you plan for this?"

He nodded. "I know a few stories that have developed in a similar way. It's even in the naval textbook. I'd prepared a few different courses of action since I wasn't sure what the enemy admiral's personality would be like, but it seems he's going to depend on reliable tactics. Meanwhile, his captains are faithful and obedient."

Regis had taken great care in observing the enemy's movements. While their line of battle wasn't perfect, it appeared that every single ship was dutifully obeying their orders. They wouldn't provide an opening quite so easily.

But that makes them easier to read. Perhaps I shouldn't take their admiral out

too quickly. I fear what his replacement might come up with... Regis mused. Despite the faint pangs of anxiety he could feel, he was a man who valued knowledge and calculations over instinct.



The mouth of the bay was to the west, with Port Ciennbourg being inside the inlet to the east. The Western Liberation Fleet had thus entered from the west, lost two ships to cannon fire, and was now headed for the bay's southern arm. They would run aground if they continued on their current course; it was about time for them to decide whether they would turn to the east or west.

Following the exchange, High Britannia's six Princess-class ships had initially turned back east, positioning themselves to protect the transport ships. Of course, they had no intention of letting the imperials get away, and gave chase soon enough.

On the deck of the flagship Frantam, Altina leaned over the port-side handrail. "Regis! Regis! They're getting closer!"

"They can't just overlook imperial ships in their waters. Perhaps they'd have ignored us had we immediately retreated, but since we dawdled, they're going to pursue."

"Aren't they going to catch up!?"

"I'm not so sure about that."

Regis unsteadily hobbled over to Bertram, relying on the handrail to keep his balance. He had spent what little vitality he had enduring his seasickness and the bombardment.

"...Admiral."

"Oh, Strategist. How was your first battle on the sea? Not that it's over yet."

"Honestly? I want to drop anchor in a nice bed right about now..."

"Can't say I'm faring any better, but retreat will have to wait until we've baited them forward a bit more."

"What a shame... Err, also—when we take aim, could we avoid targeting the first ship?"

At that request, Bertram appeared rather perplexed. “I presume their admiral is a man called Oxford, but whoever it is, I could tell from that battery that he’s quite an excellent commander. Wouldn’t it benefit us to take him out as soon as we get the chance?”

“Yes, well... While he’s definitely skilled... I have to say— Urp.” Regis cupped a hand over his mouth. The simple act of speaking was enough to make his stomach violently churn.

Bertram looked somewhat amazed. “Very well, we won’t aim for their flagship. Now, how about you get some rest?”

“...I need to watch and see how they move.”

“Hm. Then watch from my quarters. They’re located at the very back, and you’ll get an even better view of the enemy from there.”

“Eh...? Is that really okay?”

“Of course. I don’t mind. Oh, Your Highness must be tired as well. My first mate will guide you, so please, get some rest.”

As the admiral gestured, his young adjutant opened the door into the cabin. “If you would follow me.”

“...Thank you.”

“I’m not really tired, but, well... a glass of water would probably hit the spot,” Altina said, following as well.

The captain’s quarters lay beyond a meeting room, and while they weren’t spacious by any definition of the word, they were quite a step up from the floor, where most sailors slept.

As befitted the room of a noble, the furnishings were all high class. There was a chair upholstered with velvet and a bed with silk sheets. A heavy wooden desk with a gold-inlaid ornament case built into it was bolted to the floor. And while its flame would certainly be snuffed out in the midst of battle, there was even a small fireplace.

The back wall boasted a rectangular window, which did indeed offer a better view than the quarterdeck. Regis moved the chair right beside it and promptly

took a seat, watching the enemy battleships gaining on them.

“Ah... Looks like we’re turning already.”

“We gave the order a moment ago,” the adjutant said, pouring water into a teacup.

The fleet took another right turn, nearly grazing the land as it headed west. From the enemy’s perspective, did it look like they were simply running away?

As Altina peered out the window as well, the adjutant handed her the teacup. “By all means, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.”

“Please rest here for a while.”

He gave a reverent bow, and then he was gone. His etiquette almost made him seem like a noble welcoming a royal visitor, but they were in the midst of a war, and Altina was their commander. A salute would have been more proper, but... Altina was both young and a woman. The soldiers were having some trouble seeing her as a superior officer.

Regis and Altina were left in the captain’s quarters alone.

“Looks like some things never change...” Altina said with a shrug.

“Well, there’s not much we can do about that,” Regis replied, his eyes fixed on the ships.

Altina downed her water in one gulp, then mimicked what the adjutant had done to pour another. Once she had returned, she offered the teacup to Regis. “Here, you have some too.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“It’s hard to notice since you’re soaked from the seawater, but I’m sure you’ve been sweating quite a bit.”

“...Right.” Regis downed the water, wetting his parched throat.

“The enemy is closer than they were before... Hey, Regis... How do High Britannia’s ships move so fast?” Altina asked as she stared out the window.

“You want to know the difference between a sailboat and a steam boat?”

“A steam boat burns coal, right? I’ve seen a steam train before, and I know that moves faster than a carriage. I’ve heard bits and pieces about the logic behind it all, too... but that’s not what I meant. I want to know why the Empire can’t make one when High Britannia can.”

“Hm... I’d say that simply comes down to more limited industrial technology. We know the principle behind the steam engine, but if we wanted to make one, we’d need a system in place to mass-produce parts with high precision. It’s the same with the ammunition for their new guns—we just don’t have the necessary machining tools.”

In Belgaria, if someone wanted metal to be formed into a highly precise shape, they would need to rely on the skills of a professional craftsman. High Britannia, on the other hand, was getting more adept at using machinery to produce components.

“They use machines to make machines?”

“That’s right. We have factories in Belgaria too, you know? Though they’re not as large-scale as the ones in High Britannia.”

“I’ve never seen a factory before. I’d never even gotten a proper look at a smithy until we stopped by your brother-in-law’s workshop.”

“Really? That’s somewhat surprising.”

“It wasn’t my fault, though. Up until a year ago, I wasn’t allowed to freely leave the palace.”

“...Still. If you read a few more books, I don’t think you’d be so oblivious about how the world works.”

“Urk...! I-I was busy learning how to use a sword, okay!? A sword! I’m an expert when it comes to swords!”

“Yes, yes—but that speaks to the nature of the Belgarian Empire as a whole. Our soldiers are unrivaled, but our lack of certain factories has led to us being chased down by steam ships. Does that answer your question?”

“Grr...” Altina made a face like she was chewing on something particularly bitter.

Regis returned his gaze outside the window. There was land to his right—a cape covered in tall trees. There was a risk of them running aground if they got too close to the shoal, but... even with this risk, there was value in keeping this position right now. Following closely behind them were the three remaining allied Aeterna-classes, all of which had been damaged to some degree in the previous exchange.

Black smoke trailed from the enemy warships' chimneys as they gradually approached from the northeast, coming in diagonally from Regis's left. As the enemy had the advantage in speed, they had no need to stray so close to the cape, and were essentially chasing the Belgian ships in a straight line.

"...Compared to the enemy ships, we fall short when it comes to both range and speed. But we do have a chance. We're almost in position."

All of a sudden, eighteen speedy Urathenos-class support ships appeared from the mouth of the bay. They were less than half the size of an Aeterna-class, and could never hope to stand up to a Princess-class in an exchange of cannon fire.

Britannia's admiral, Oxford, showed no indication that he would change his fleet's course. He must not have seen the Urathenos-classes as a significant threat, ignoring them as the meaningless reinforcements of a last-ditch effort.

However, these Urathenos-classes were the key to Regis's plan, pivotal to opening the curtains on their counterattack.

As arranged, the flagship Frantam gave the flag signals. The role of the support ships was to receive these orders and relay them to allies, and in no time at all, a number of explosive bursts caused the trees along the cape to quiver.

The bursts came from neither the fleeing Aeterna-classes nor the pursuing Princess-classes; it was a roar from beyond the cape. And accompanying the *boom*, innumerable black spheres dotted the blue sky. Cannon shells. The enemy vessels frantically turned their rudders, desperate to get away from the cape... but they were too late.

A simultaneous bombardment from thirty-seven ships of the Western Liberation Fleet. Their shells came down like heavy rain, causing the water's

surface to burst open like it had been brought to a turbulent boil, swallowing the enemy's line of battle.

The enemy's second and third ships were caught up in the barrage. While the Princess-classes' decks were sturdy, they would still crumble under so many direct hits.

"Amazing! We did it!" Altina cried out, pressing her forehead against the glass.

It had been his own proposal, yet Regis still shuddered at this massive destructive power. It was an attack that would turn any normal ship into driftwood. However, at the epicenter of the concentrated downpour, the two enemy ships still stood. They were quite lurching over, but still afloat.

Regis's voice quivered in shock. "D-Don't tell me... they're still standing!?"

That being said, these ships seemed to be little more than specters. Their masts were snapped, sails ablaze, smokestacks bent. The decks that had taken so many blows finally ruptured as flames rose all over.

"Ah! Regis! There's a wave coming!"

The massive bombardment had produced a considerably large wave that rocked the ships. The Frantam and its consort ships had turned into the bay the moment they heard the cannons fire, but one didn't make it in time. Of the four ships, the one that was farthest back was thrust onto land. It gave off a creaking noise as it tilted, then stopped moving entirely as though it had been fastened in place.

"Eh!? What happened!?"

"...They ran aground."

While the other ships had managed to avoid being beached, they were having difficulty steering. After the wave struck land, it came back in full force, now pulling the ships into the open water. That was where the enemy ships were, and the last place they wanted to go... but they had no way of preventing it when their rudders didn't work. They were no better than leaves being swept up in a current.

Even Altina had to grab onto the desk to stay upright. Meanwhile, Regis was all-too-easily thrown onto the floor, chair and all.

“Ech...!?”

“Khh! Y-You okay, Regis!?”

“Y-Yeah... Somehow...”

Now that Regis was on the floor, there was nowhere else he could fall. In a sense, he was safe. *All that's left is to wait for these waves to die down, momentarily flee out of the bay, and then—* His thoughts were interrupted by another roar of cannon fire.

Barely on her feet, Altina stumbled to the window. “Th-They’ve opened fire!”

“What...!?”

With the seas this rough and so much distance between them, it was inconceivable for the enemy to attempt another bombardment. A majority of their shots were completely off the mark, but the next instant, a large destructive *crash* pierced Regis’s ears.

The Frantam heaved upward.

We were hit!? The teacup tumbled from the desk and shattered as it hit the floor. *How bad are the damages...?* He could hear screams coming from the outside. There was no doubt about it—they had taken a direct hit.

The ship rocked back and forth so drastically that Regis struggled to even find his footing. But he couldn’t stay holed up inside. Though the best he could do was crawl, he quickly made for the door.

“Where are you going!?” Altina cried.

“I’m going to get a grasp on the situation! You stay here!”

“What are you talking about!? I’m the one who should go, then!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

After inching his way to the door, Regis propped his body up with one hand like an infant, barely managing to grasp the doorknob with the other. Then came another impact—one that very nearly flipped him over like a turtle that

had been kicked in the belly.

“Whoa!?”

“What are you doing!? Get a grip!” Altina exclaimed, wrapping an arm around Regis’s back to hold him up. She was practically like the desk bolted to the ground—no matter how much the floor tipped, she stood perfectly upright on both feet.

Regis looked at her, dumbfounded. “Altina, are you... actually a lot heavier than you look?”

“Are you asking to be thrown out the window?”

“S-Sorry.”

“It’s not about weight or leg strength. At times like these, you have to concentrate on your core! Now pull yourself together! We’re going to go and have a look!”

At that, Altina turned the knob and pushed. The wind noisily bellowed through the open door; a portion of the conference room wall had been damaged.

“This is terrible...” Regis groaned.

Did we take a direct hit to the front of the cabin...!? That was where the helm and captain’s chair were, and on this flagship, where the admiral and his adjutant were stationed as well.

Regis’s legs gave out in terror, but Altina dragged him along through the half-destroyed door.

“So... *this* is where we were hit.”

The meeting room they were now standing in had taken the brunt of the damage. A portion of the hull had been torn through, with the surrounding wood having caught fire. The sailors were hard at work trying to extinguish the flames.

The admiral was collapsed on deck, his adjutant desperately pleading beside him. “Bertram! Bertram! Please, wake up!”

Regis and Altina raced over, and as they arrived by his side, Altina swallowed her breath. Blood was pouring from the admiral's head. He was currently receiving first aid from a sailor, but there was a limit to what could be done on a shaking ship; the most they could do was wrap cloth around the wounds.

The adjutant was on the verge of tears. "No... No... Th-The admiral... When the shell hit, he covered me, and..."

"...He took a piece of shrapnel to the head?"

This was all down to bad luck. There was little that could be done. When the seas were this rough, the enemy could only have fired out of desperation. Who would have imagined that they would land a hit, and in the most important spot, too?

Still on the floor, Bertram cracked his eyes open a sliver. "Gn... Rah..."

"A-Admiral!" his adjutant practically wailed.

The moment Bertram saw Regis, he grimaced. "Ghh... What about Her Highness?"

"I'm fine!" Altina asserted her presence beside Regis.

Bertram weakly nodded. "Good..."

"Admiral, we'll get you patched up in a jiffy!"

Completely disregarding his adjutant's hopeful words, Bertram looked straight at Regis. "...I leave the command... to you..."

"Eh!? A-Are you talking to me!? Have you mistaken me for someone else...!?"

"Please... Strategist... The fleet... and the Empire... are in... your... hands..."

And with those words, the admiral lost consciousness once more.



It was only now that a middle-aged military doctor managed to make his way over. “Carry him to the conference room, and get as much hot water as you can find! The admiral isn’t dead yet, and you’ll move quickly if you want to keep it that way!”

Those barked orders sent the pale-faced soldiers frantically on their way. But the adjutant remained, shedding tears as he fell prostrate on the floor.

“I-It can’t be...”

“Now’s no time to cry!” Altina chided.

As the beaten man raised his face, she crisply thrust a finger toward him.

“The battle still rages on! You’re his first mate, aren’t you!? You’ve watched his work more than anyone!”

“R-Right...”

“So when the admiral’s out of action, what do you think you’re doing freezing up like that!? You want us to take more of those cannon shells!? Stay like that, and you won’t be saving anyone!”

“Urp... Kh... Y-You’re right!”

He forced a salute as the rocking ship threw him from side to side, then turned to Regis, wiping the tears from his reddened eyes.

“Strategist— No, Admiral Proxy Regis Aurick! Your plan worked splendidly. Thus far, we had been unable to sink any Princess-classes no matter how many ships we sacrificed, yet you’ve managed to take out two!”

“Yes... sir.”

“The admiral must have passed the baton on to you after assessing your abilities.”

“Wait a second... You really want me to stand in as admiral? There’s no way I could possibly—”

“Now’s not the time for excuses, Regis!” Altina scolded. “The enemy’s coming!”

Initiating a bombardment from such a precarious position had caused the

enemy ships to lurch dangerously, but they had since stabilized, and were once again approaching diagonally from the left. Only one ship—the flagship—posed a direct threat at the moment. The second and third ships, while still afloat, had received the brunt of the concentrated fire and seemed to be truly out of commission. The fires blazing on their decks weren't dying down, so they would likely sink eventually.

Of the three other High Britannian ships, only one pursued the Belgian flagship, ready to assist in the offense. The other two carefully took distance from the cape, setting up formation close to the port.

The Empire's side was now composed of just three Aeterna-classes. The Frantam had taken a direct hit near the helm, and its chain of command had been thrown completely out of order. What was being demanded of Regis right now was more than just moving pieces on a board; he was to take charge, and ensure that over two thousand sailors returned alive. This was no time to dispute whether the position was appropriate for him, let alone whether he had the confidence to accept it.

"Hah... Fine. I think taking command is far beyond me, but... err... in that case, full speed toward the mouth of the bay."

"À vos ordres!"

The ship's captain and helmsman had been injured in the blast as well. Once Regis had given the order to the adjutant, he passed it on to the vice-captain, who turned the wheel himself.

"If we keep going on this course, won't they just shoot us again?" Altina asked.

"Almost certainly."

They were well within range of the Princess-class leading the chase. For a moment, Regis had thought they would turn tail and return to the port, but the loss of their consort ships seemed to have only ignited their fighting spirit.

Regis bore the brunt of his failure. "I made an error of judgment... I was under the impression that our enemy's Admiral Oxford was a man who followed textbook tactics, which led me to believe he would be easier to predict and

manage... But after losing two ships from an ambush across the cape, with the seas too rough to steer... For him to fire under such unfavorable circumstances... maybe it's his ship captain who's abnormal."

Even if the blow to the cabin had been nothing more than an unfortunate coincidence, this unpredictability was a threat. The enemy fully intended to continue the fight, and there was no telling when they would fire next.

"You don't think we can outrun them?"

"Right. They're not going to let us get away that easily. We might need a distraction."

"Out on the ocean...?" Altina asked. She seemed to be keenly interested, while the adjutant appeared to be awaiting his next order.

"Err... I want a message passed to the support ships beyond the cape. It doesn't matter if their shots won't reach, just start firing at full range. Tell the crew on this ship and the others to start shooting as well. Also, it would be nice if we could get that ship moving as we initially planned..."

Once again, the Frantam sent flag signals that were relayed by the Urathenos-class ships. Flag messages generally followed the same code, regardless of whether they were meant to go between ships or from the lookout to the sailors on deck.

In no time at all, the cannons blasted across the trees, and the three ships led by the Frantam opened fire. A massive number of shells struck the sea before they reached the enemy, the resulting splashes forming what was practically a looming wall of water. The waves came at them once again, and Regis held onto the handrail for dear life.

No book I've ever read contained such a pathetic admiral. How could I possibly serve as a standin?

"Wah..."

Despite the tumultuous shakes, as expected, Altina looked just fine. "Why did you have the support ships open fire? It doesn't look like they're hitting anything."

“That’s because the enemy doesn’t know what ships we’re hiding behind the cape. They’ll be more wary if they believe we might have cannons that can reach them, right? Then a barrage of shells comes down around them just after they hear the firing sounds.”

“But the shots that came closest were the ones from this ship.”

“That’s right.”

Not to mention, even those had fallen quite a bit short of the enemy. The Princess-classes hadn’t returned fire yet, which meant the distance between them was too far even for the Type-41 Elswicks. There was no possible way that the Empire’s cannons would reach.

“...But it will still serve as a distraction,” Regis continued. “What’s more, with the sea so churned up, it’ll be harder for them to take aim.”

Yet there’s still the chance of a lucky shot... A chill ran down Regis’s spine as the burnt cabin entered the corner of his eye, and he recalled the worrying state of the admiral. *The next one down will almost certainly be me.*

In all honesty, he didn’t mind that being the case—he saw it as inevitable, even. The moment an inept administrative officer stepped foot on the battlefield, he was just asking to be struck down. However, he wanted to avoid a situation where Altina might be taken out.

The only purpose it served was to buy time, but he continued the bombardment.

The wind was picking up, which meant they were nearing the mouth of the bay. Since a single shot would be enough to sink the Urathenos-class ships, they pulled away the moment they were within range. The small vessels that were at work recovering the crew of the sunken Aeterna-classes also bolted like cats spooked by a vicious dog’s bark.

Their plan was to swap places with the single massive ship of the line peeking out from the edge of the cape.

“It’s the Poseidam!” one of the sailors cried out.

The strongest ship in the Belgarian Navy—the 120-gun armored Poseidam. Its

wooden hull was covered with iron plates as though it were a knight in full armor, and its broadside came equipped with far more cannons than the Aeterna-classes. With its countless gun ports wide open, it slowly crept into the bay.

There was little to criticize about the Poseidam-class in terms of armor and firepower, but it fell behind the Princess-class in both speed and range.

This massive ship of the line carried out its charge alone. So long as it continued approaching the port, it would be able to crush High Britannia's transport ships in the blink of an eye.

Were they to match blows with the Poseidam, even a Princess-class would suffer damages too great to ignore. The enemy flagship immediately dropped speed, and a moment later, the other ship followed suit. Both then changed course in preparation to fight the behemoth.

Coming too close to the cape wasn't an option, as the Belgian support ships would simply bombard them again. The enemy was well aware of this, and handled themselves cautiously as they prepared to intercept.

As that was going on, the flagship Frantam slipped out of the bay all too easily.

Altina leaned out over the starboard side. "Can that one ship defeat them alone!?"

"Definitely not. It wouldn't even win one-on-one... They'd keep picking at it from afar until, eventually, the gunpowder inside would ignite and the ship would explode."

Belgaria's armored ship of the line was designed under the assumption that it wouldn't fall short in firing range. In cases where its range was evidently shorter, such a slow ship was little more than a sitting duck.

Regis stood next to Altina, resting his elbow on the handrail. "Our losses total up to three Aeterna-classes, quite a few injured, and the Poseidam. In return, we took down two Princess-class ships. Would you say that's an even trade...?"

"What!? You sacrificed such a massive ship just so we could escape!?"

“No matter where the exchange took place, such a slow-footed ship wouldn’t be able to outrun High Britannia’s ships. That’s why we removed all the sailors, unloaded the gunpowder, and then fixed the wheel in place. If we kept eight hundred men on that antiquated thing and it sunk, the casualties would be far more than we could manage.”

At times, an overblown ally could be even more of a risk on the battlefield than a powerful enemy. While Regis knew that his decision probably wouldn’t get much support, the way he saw it, that sluggish hunk of metal would cause more casualties than the enemy. That was why he had sent it into the bay as an unmanned vessel, with the official stated goal being to support their retreat.

Oblivious to this, the enemy grew more wary by the second, distancing themselves from the Poseidam and initiating a long-range bombardment. There was no risk of the ship exploding anytime soon since it wasn’t loaded with any gunpowder, so despite the countless shots it endured, it didn’t seem any closer to going down.

However, while the hull was clad in metal plates, the greatest weakness of a sailing ship was still the sails. They began to tear and burn from the blasts, and soon enough, the ship stopped moving entirely. It simply bobbed up and down on the waves.

Eventually, one shell managed to open a hole near the bottom of the ship, and it began to take water. Not just warships, but all large vessels were equipped with a pump to expel water from inside, but these naturally depended on manpower. An unmanned ship had no one to man the pumps.

As the ship went down, slowly capsizing toward its flooding port side, Regis observed closely. “The flagship is ship number one... The ones taken out by our supports were ships four and six... The one that immediately moved to assist the flagship was ship five, and... I think the ones holding the line near the port are ships eight and nine.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Warships generally convey orders using flag signals, but a ship that’s always waiting on orders generally won’t be able to respond in time. Plus, there are times when the flags are obscured by all the smoke. That’s why the personality

of each individual captain is surprisingly important.”

“You mean, like, their fighting habits?”

“Like what they’ll do. When they sense danger.”

“Were you able to figure something out?”

“I made a mistake just a moment ago in assessing the nature of that ship’s captain, so I think it’s dangerous to jump to conclusions, but I’m starting to see it.” At that, Regis turned to the adjutant standing on the quarterdeck. “Could you mark down the spot?”

“Yes, sir!”

Altina looked as though she once again wanted to ask something.

“...Uh, weren’t you present at the strategy meeting?” Regis asked, bemused.

“Well, when you’re talking to the navy people, you use all sorts of complicated words that I’ve never heard before.”

“...If there’s something that you don’t understand, just ask and I’ll gladly explain.”

“That’s way too embarrassing! They’ll laugh at me, you know. ‘How can you possibly be the commander when you don’t even know what that word means?’ That’s what they’ll say.”

“I see... In that case, there’s a good book that I’d recommend. It’s called *A Sailor’s Essentials*, written by a very famous admiral a hundred years ago. It explains all the relevant jargon, as well as basic tactics. I’m sure you’ll find it useful.”

“Hm... How thick is it?”

“Thick? Um, I’d say... around here.”

Regis rarely paid any mind to the number of pages in a book, so he had to think for a moment before he could make an approximate gesture with his fingers.

All of a sudden, Altina’s face lit up. “That looks doable for me.”

“Yeah, the individual volumes are pretty thin.”

“Eh... How many are there?”

“I think reading up to volume five should be enough to understand the basics. The passages I really took a liking to were around volume eight, though. The phrases used are a bit old-school, but it was a lot easier than working through books in High Britannian and Hispanian with a dictionary in the other hand. There aren't many proper books about the navy, you know, so it's a very valuable resource. I read it back in the military library so I don't have a copy on me, but I think you should be able to order the complete set.”

“Yes, uh... Right. I'll get on that. Someday soon, for sure...”

When it came to horseback riding and swordplay, Altina would immediately and vigorously dedicate herself to training, be it day or night. Yet when reading or studying was involved, she would oftentimes put it off as long as possible.

Regis merely shrugged again.

“We've recorded the location of the wreckage,” the adjutant said as he walked down from the quarterdeck.

“All right... It should be okay to sail to the third rendezvous point now; they won't chase us if we're this far away. And, putting that aside... could we leave around half of our smaller ships to keep up reconnaissance around the bay? I don't care if they flee the moment things turn sour, but they are to continue their surveillance until we begin the offensive tomorrow. I want to know as much as I can about the enemy ships' movements.”

“Understood.” The adjutant gave a salute, then introduced himself once again. “I am Admiral Bertram's First Mate, Third-Grade Combat Officer Sparke. I'll be at your service for a while, Admiral Proxy Aurick.”

“Err... *The princess* is the commander of the western front.”

“I am aware. However, as admiral proxy, you hold the right to exercise command over the fleet.”

Altina nodded deeply. “Yep, that's right! I accept Regis as admiral proxy! And I do have appointive power, don't I?”

“Erk...”

While she absolutely detested studying, the princess remembered everything that Regis said in great detail. Her memory was so good, in fact, that Regis's own words would occasionally come back to bite him.

Admiral proxy. I can understand taking temporary control during an emergency, but am I supposed to continue taking command after this? Even though I'm a complete greenhorn at naval battles? Regis could remember a few plans from the books he'd read, but he had nothing but anxieties about taking command in a real battle.

"Yeah... I'm not sure I should say this, but... the plan we're going to carry out is really quite dangerous. I'm sure we'll have to make sacrifices, but—"

"Admiral Bertram entrusted command to you. Act with confidence."

"Confidence, eh...? That's quite a tall order," Regis replied, letting out a sigh for the umpteenth time.

At that, the man filling in for the captain of the Frantam spoke up. "I apologize for interrupting, sir! There has been a proposal to change the flagship to the Brouillard."

"Are we that badly damaged...?"

"The shot has caused the Frantam's deck to warp, and opened holes in the cabin, stern, and broadside."

"...I see. You are responsible for this ship, and I respect your decision."

"Thank you, sir." The man saluted, then ran to a messenger. So too did the adjutant, who had to pass this order on to the smaller ships.

Altina turned her eyes to another ship of the line approaching them. "Are we going to board that one next?"

"That's right. Once we've switched over, we'll have to start preparing for the next plan. I can't say I'm all that confident, but... I'll do what I can."

"We're going to take out the enemy, right!?"

"Wrong."

"...Huh?"

“We can’t keep moving around in an inferior ship forever. We need to get our hands on an equally capable fighting force, and fast.”

“You mean we’re making a steam ship?”

“We wouldn’t have the time. In its current state, it would take the Empire maybe fifty years to build a steam ship. But the solution is simple—we just have to borrow one from the enemy, right?”

“Eh!? You think they’ll lend us one?”

“...I don’t know about that.”

As its damaged sails prevented the Frantam from picking up speed, everyone on board was quickly transferred onto the Brouillard, the fourth vessel of the fleet.

Admiral Bertram was still unconscious, asleep on his bed in his quarters. The rest was up to the medic. All Regis could do was endeavor to give a good report when the admiral opened his eyes—to retake Port Ciennbourg, stop the High Britannian invasion, and defend Belgaria.

Altina glanced toward the east. They weren’t so far from the coast, and rather than the sea, it was Belgaria’s beaches and cliffs that lined the horizon.

“...Do you think Latrielle is all right?”

“The general isn’t going to lose that easily. Though High Britannia’s Oswald is a formidable foe.”

“That commander... He’s a little scary. But that’s not all. It might be strange for me to say this, but... it’s like a light going out on a night road, this sort of...”

“The Empire is at war. It would be strange if you didn’t feel anxious.”

“Is that... how it works?” As she found herself caught up in a wave of new emotions, Altina’s words became few and far between.

“...No one knows what the future holds.”

“Not even you, Regis?”

“...All I know is what I’ve read in books. Nothing more.”



Chapter 4: The Battle of Épée Prière Bay

Port Ciennbourg—

It happened aboard the Garnet—High Britannia's ninth 74-gun Princess-class. Its contours were dominated by three masts, and smokestacks just tall enough that the exhaust wouldn't obscure the crew's vision.

The first Princess-class ships had been built with only one smokestack, but were redesigned from the sixth one onward to include two more. There were also other minute differences between these ships, such as the size of the sails and placement of the cannons.

Aside from that, however, their structure was fundamentally the same throughout: each ship was 120 cubits (52 m) long with a span of 34 cubits (15 m). The sails could also be folded away when the steam engine was in use, though the masts remained in place, with the tallest one in the middle towering at 130 cubits (58 m) tall.

The number of cannons on the broadside was rather modest for a ship of this scale, and they weren't positioned much higher than water level. This was a considerable contrast to Belgaria's Aeterna-classes, which proudly stood tall like castles floating on the sea. They gave off an air of utmost dignity as ships of the line, and the unique artistic flourishes that decorated each one made them akin to fine pieces of art.

Princess-classes, on the other hand, were low and plain. This did carry the advantage of making them harder to hit, but when the seas were rough, the lowest of their three gun decks was prone to becoming flooded. From there, it became near impossible to tell who was supposed to be operating the pumps, and who was meant to be manning the cannons.

This issue could not simply be ignored, especially since the waterline rose much higher than anticipated when the ship was fully loaded with coal. There was little doubt that the Princess-class boasted overwhelming war potential

compared to the warships of other nations, but to the user, it definitely had its flaws. It was the first large-scale warship to be loaded with a steam engine, and was very much still a work in progress.

The ceiling in the cabin of a Princess-class was considerably low, and the door—which was five steps down from the main deck—was so small that one might assume it had been made for children. The passage inside led to even more stairs, and the ship's thick, sturdy armor meant it was rather cramped. Only when it opened up into the bridge did this claustrophobic sensation subside.

At the center of the room was the helm. There was another on the quarterdeck, where there was a better field of vision, and this was the one that would be used in times of peace. After all, it was far easier to perform careful maneuvers such as docking and approaching allied vessels with a clear view of the ship.

During times of war, they would move to the helm inside the ship. Here, they were protected by the sturdy poop deck which, with some luck, could endure a direct cannon blast.

The captain's quarters lay at the rear end of the bridge, and were far enough inside that their door didn't need to be quite so narrow. Inside that room, a woman in a sailor's uniform had a gentle smile on her face.

“Oh, good work, Captain Morins.”

She was nineteen years of age—a woman with blue eyes and glossy long blond hair which was bundled behind her head. There was a thin scarf wrapped around her collar, and she wore an overcoat that seemed a little too long for her short stature, so much so that the belt tying it down around her waist made it look as though she was wearing a skirt. Though she was, of course, wearing pants underneath.

Her name was Laurelin, and she served as an adjutant. While it was apparently rare to employ female officers in other countries, High Britannia was a country ruled by a queen and thus saw little need to place men above women in most fields.

“Is the conference over?” she asked.

“No, get this—we haven’t even discussed anything yet.”

“Are you serious!? It’s already past noon...”

“MacCunn’s taking things hard and we were all trying to cheer him up. His son was on the sixth ship, you know.”

MacCunn was the captain of the High Britannian Royal Navy’s first ship. He had refrained from taking his son aboard in case it was seen as favoritism, but now he was deeply regretting that decision.

“That’s some tough luck.”

“Yeah, and you saw how sudden that surprise attack was. I doubt he had time to jump overboard.”

“...To go without lunch.”

“Oh, were you talking about me? Well, I didn’t get anything to eat, I’ll admit.”

“Let me brew you some tea, then. We have biscuits, too.”

“I could really do with some jam.”

With that remark, Huey Morins—the captain of the Garnet—gave a wink and took a seat in his chair. The living area in the captain’s quarters also served as the conference room, lounge, and dining hall for the ship’s officers. It was here that the top brass would drink tea, eat, drink tea, draft plans, and drink tea.

Laurelin put a pot on to boil, measuring out some leaves before throwing them in. Their faint aroma imparted the captain with a sense of security, and it wasn’t long before he loosened up enough to leak a complaint.

“Seems the admiral thinks Belgaria will strike again.”

“Fufu... If they do, then we just need to sink them again. We won’t fall victim to such an ambush if we stay well away from the cape.”

“You’re right.”

“By all means, Captain.”

Laurelin placed a teacup on the table, and a thin trail of steam rose from the light-crimson liquid inside. As Morins brought the drink to his lips, a pleasant scent greeted his nostrils, its faint astringency blowing away his drowsiness and

its gentle sweetness doing wonders to ease his fatigue.

“Mnn... Your tea is as good as ever, Laurelin. It makes me never want to go home.”

“Keep saying that, and your wife will surely chew you out again.”

“Ah, thinking about her makes my head hurt. Take it from me—never marry a bigshot’s little girl.”

“I don’t think that’s something I’ll have to worry about, Captain.”

“I suppose not.”

“As I recall, her father is an admiral in the navy...”

“Once upon a time, I was brimming with ambition. I wanted to become the captain of a warship, y’see. ‘This puny support ship ain’t good enough for me,’ I told myself. ‘I need one of the big boys.’ Ah, how wrong I was... Then this girl I met at a party falls head over heels for me. Well, I was quite a looker back in the day. I married into her house, and it was smooth sailing up to the point where Daddy’s recommendation made me a captain of the newest line of ships. It was all blue skies above—a rose-colored life, I tell you.”

“The way you’re speaking makes me think that isn’t the case anymore.”

“A woman changes when she’s had a kid.”

“I’ve never had one, so I couldn’t say...”

“That so? Wanna try for one?”

“With a bearded old man?”

“Aren’t beards manly?”

“I much prefer gentlemen.”

“Oh, I’m gentlemanly enough in bed, wouldn’t you agree?”

Morins reached out a hand and pinched Laurelin’s scarf, pulling her lips close. Her cold blue eyes stared deep into his soul.

“...It’s still daytime, Captain. What about the conference?”

“Don’t worry about it. If those Belgian half-wits *are* coming back, it won’t be

until tomorrow morning at the earliest. And the conference is pointless; that gorilla's plan'll be something straight outta the textbook."

"Just to clarify—by 'that gorilla,' are you referring to our dear admiral?"

"What's this I hear? Oi, don't tell me you like the wild sort. Do rough 'n' tough men get you heated? Hah, you shoulda just said so!"

"No, it's just... that gorilla admiral of yours is... Mnn..."

Laurelin's words melted away into a quiet moan as Morins's lips suddenly met hers. A series of wet smacking noises could be heard as their tongues entwined, eventually parting with a small *pop*.

"You're always... so forceful..." she murmured, her eyes misty and her cheeks red.

"Forget the admiral. I know I've already forgotten about him."

"That's quite hard to do when he's right behind you."

"H-Huh!?"

Captain Morins hurriedly turned around, just in time to see a hairy hand clutch his head in a claw hold, squeezing so hard that Morins was almost certain he could hear an audible grating sound. The pain was unbearable, so much so that he thought his skull was about to crack open.

Red, sun-bleached hair more evenly cut than a well-trimmed lawn, topped with the cap of an admiral. Two enraged eyes piercing straight through him. Bulging muscles that could easily be made out even beneath the man's military uniform. It was the admiral of the Queen's Navy, Lieutenant General Goliath Oxford—a man so large, it was a mystery how he had managed to make it through a door so comparatively narrow.



“Ahem, ahem... Can you hear me, Captain Morins?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“Have you finished your business that you deemed urgent enough to put our conference on hold, Captain Morins?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“Then I would like to continue the conference.”

“Of course, sir! Admiral, sir! For our beloved homeland! For the fleet, our families, our bodies and souls! To the best of my ability, through thick and thin, at any and all costs—I intend to fight the Belgarian Empire! ...Incidentally, did you happen to hear my little joke?”

“‘Gorilla’?”

“I-I’m just a monkey myself, see? O-Ook! Ook! A-And the Belgarian Navy is a far more pressing matter than such meaningless jokes, Admiral, sir! They will *most definitely* attack again tomorrow morning! Yes, now’s not the time to be obsessing over something as trivial as a light gibe! I-I wasn’t being serious, really!”

“What’s your basis for saying they’ll come tomorrow morning?”

“In these parts, the wind blows in from the sea during the daytime. It’s already considerably weaker in the bay as it is, so that’s their only opportunity to launch a raid. Our transport ships are their target, and considering their size, it’ll take us two, maybe three, days to unload. This means tomorrow’s the only day that they can guarantee they’ll still be in the port. Once we’re out on the open seas, we’ll be a lot more wary of attacks, and it’ll be tough for them to identify our sea routes.”

“What countermeasures would you suggest?”

“We have four Princess-class ships, so let’s hide one outside the bay. That way, when the enemy enters, we can seal off their only exit. And if we’re attacking them from two sides, they won’t be able to get away like they did today. Even if the Empire outnumbered us, a majority of their units are mid-sized vessels that won’t be able to contribute to the battle. It was proven in that

bombardment that their main ship's armoring is thin; as long as they don't have a means to escape, annihilating them is a simple matter."

"And how do you plan to hide that ship outside the bay?"

"The Empire will certainly come in from the northwest, so it should be easy enough if we position it on the southwest side."

"Hm?"

"Oh, I say they'll approach from the *northwest* because the wind blows in from the *southwest* in Touranne at this time of year. A sailing ship would surely want to attack from the southwest for this very reason, but a commander that easy to predict wouldn't have employed a bombardment from across the cape."

"So you're basing this on their commander's nature..."

"Admiral Bertram was the one leading Belgaria's fleet, and he's a man who prefers mainstream tactics. But I presume someone else is holding the reins right now. Perhaps Bertram was dismissed for losing the Battle of Touranne."

"I see... It does seem that way." At that, the admiral effortlessly pushed Morins aside. "What do you lot have to say on the matter?"

Morins had been caught in Oxford's vice-like grip for so long that it was like his very skull was throbbing with pain, and he rubbed his head with tears in his eyes. He hadn't noticed since he'd been so engrossed in the conversation, but the other officers had gathered in the room as well.

Each and every one of them, boarding my ship without telling me... Morins grumbled to himself.

Meanwhile, Laurelin fixed her scarf and stepped away from the table, immediately getting to work preparing tea.

Just serve them seawater! Morins yelled on the inside. But rather than voicing his displeasure, he started brushing off the tabletop. "Welcome to the Garnet. Please, take a seat. Make yourself at home."

"Good grief, what a smooth talker you are."

The first officer to speak was MacCunn, captain of the first Princess-class. He was a hardy middle-aged man, wearing a black scarf wrapped around one arm

—a look that had practically become his insignia. His eyes were bloodshot, and despite having only just lost his son, the man was so devoted to his work that Morins would go as far as to call him uncanny.

“Forget about the tea. I think the plan’s fine, a’ight? But I can’t stand that Morins is the one who came up with it.”

Next to chip in was Barrister, captain of the fifth Princess-class. While he was still a young man, he hailed from a famed house and was brimming with vigor and confidence. His assertive fighting style had earned him considerable military gains, and during both the Battle of Touranne and the exchange that had taken place in Épée Prière Bay, he was the first one to sink an enemy ship.

Oh really? Well, that goes both ways, asshole! Morins spat back in his head. He didn’t let his frustration show, of course; he was an adult, and carried himself as one.

Orsen, captain of the eighth Princess-class, was the only man in the fleet older than the admiral. He was a rare individual who came from a house of accountants, and had served as a chef in the royal palace before joining the navy. When the older model ship of the line that he had captained was retired, he was sure that he would be retiring along with it, only to find himself captain of a new Princess-class under the late Queen Charlotte’s recommendation.

“...Our objective is to deliver our supplies to the front line. That is why we guard the cargo ships and secure the port...” Orsen began. “If we overextend ourselves—if we make fighting the enemy a goal—then there is a chance that we might make a crucial blunder. I am reluctant to remove one of our valuable ships from the port.”

It was a cautious argument befitting an old captain.

Morins lowered his head in apology again and again. “Ah, of course! It’s all precisely as you say! My thought process was so cursory that I didn’t even consider such things!”

In all honesty, Morins didn’t care what plan they decided on—the important part was that he had managed to play off slipping out of the conference.

The gorilla—or rather, Admiral Oxford—thought for a moment. Morins could

already guess what he was about to say.

“Hm. There is some merit to Captain Morins’s proposal, but I believe that focusing on defense is more in line with our orders.”

Knew it. Are you really all right with such a passive response? Morins thought. But he continued to listen on in silence, the fake smile plastered over his face not faltering in the slightest.

The admiral went on. “The assertion that the imperial fleet will come tomorrow morning is one that I agree with. Let’s double our patrols. I leave command in the hands of Captain Barrister.”

“Got it, Admiral. Put me on it, and I won’t let a single fish get away.”

“I would like everything to be unloaded by tomorrow so that we can set sail early the following morning. It’s earlier than scheduled, but please act with that in mind. Captain Orsen, I would like you to oversee this.”

“...Understood. I shall expedite the process as much as possible, and we will dump any cargo that does not make it off the ships in time.”

“Good. MacCunn, Morins—be ready for battle. Keep the steam engines running through the night.”

“Understood!” MacCunn gave a firm salute, and of course, Morins did too.

Laurelin set out enough drinks for everyone. “Please enjoy our finest Suriname tea.”

Hey now, don’t use the expensive leaves! Squeeze out the rags or something! That’s more than enough for them, Morins cursed to himself.

Oxford thanked Laurelin for her efforts, but then politely declined the tea. “My humblest apologies. We are in a situation where the kingdom’s fate is at stake, and we don’t have a second to waste. I must excuse myself,” he said, before promptly leaving the room.

Following suit, the other captains shambled off to their respective ships.

It was finally quiet. Five cups in total were set on the table, and now that Morins was finally alone with Laurelin again, he sat back down and picked one up.

“Good grief, how restless can they get? Forgoing good tea? Can you believe them?”

“Are you sure you should be relaxing? You were told to prepare for battle.”

“Belgaria won’t attack until tomorrow morning. We already know that, yet I’m supposed to be ready for battle? That means I can’t even disembark my ship.”

“...If you disembarked, you’d just end up drinking all night.”

“Well, how about it? We can pick up where we left off, going until the wee hours of the morning. It’s not like we can leave the ship, after all.”

“...You never learn, do you?”

“Hey, life’s too short to be a saint. Compared to brewing tea that no one drinks, this’ll be a much better use of your time.”

“As per navy regulations, ‘When told to be ready for battle, one must be prepared to immediately respond to any signals from the flagship.’ Did you know that?”

“Oh, I’m well aware. In fact, I’m already perfectly prepared. All that’s left now is to wait for the signal.”

“But you never wait... Ever.”

“You just don’t notice it. All the signals you’re sending me.”

Morins reached out his hand, and once again grabbed Laurelin by her scarf.



Work continued late into the night for the Western Liberation Fleet, even though they had exchanged cannon fire with High Britannia that very morning. Regis did not get a wink of sleep, instead opting to ride a raft smaller than a fishing boat back into the port. It needed to be as small as possible so that they could slip through the enemy patrols undetected.

Moving under the cover of darkness, Regis issued detailed orders to the sailors, his voice shrouded from the enemy by the crashing waves. He was using those skilled at swimming to conduct work on the sunken Poseidam.

The seas were cold in June, and the Queen's Navy was keeping up its patrols, so they had to act in short bursts. And of course, finding the precise location of a sunken ship in the dead of night was no easy feat. Regis had brought two black-painted ropes, securing them at separate points on the shore, and then had the sailors swim out to sea with the unfastened ends. The aim was to have the ropes cross over roughly above where the Poseidam had sunk, but as long ropes could weigh a hefty amount, moving them required multiple people working together.

Regis had been the one to propose this idea, but it was by no means revolutionary. This was a method widely implemented when making maps.

"...In my humble opinion, the real smart ones are those who can see something that no one has ever noticed before. I'm just following what they've written." That was the awkward response he tended to give whenever someone praised his proposal.

As far as Regis was concerned, had he actually been a good strategist, there wouldn't have been any allied casualties, the soldiers wouldn't have been forced to swim in the cold at night, and the enemy's ships would have perhaps even been seized by now. But he didn't know any magical tactics that would have guaranteed those results, and he was more than aware that such notions would never come to him.

That was why Regis believed he was incompetent, and that those who had given him this position were simply overestimating his abilities. *But I should at least fulfill my duties*, he concluded, rubbing his tired eyes as he listened to reports and gave out orders nonstop.

Regis's ploy couldn't be found in any proper textbook, so while he could leave the actual work to others, there wasn't anyone he could trust the finer details to. He needed to be on site to give directions.

If only I could swim... Though I suppose it's a bit late for that.

While they were only in the bay, vision was poor and the waves still posed a considerable risk. Were Regis to enter the sea, his lack of proper training would ultimately cause their groundwork for the plan to devolve into a tragic accident.

"No matter what you do, don't fall overboard," the sailors pressured him.

The water in the bay wasn't too deep, so the massive shipwreck was relatively close to the surface. And since the necessary tools had all been prepared below the Poseidam's deck in advance, the work they were doing here wasn't anything too complicated.

Upon reaching the underwater wreckage, the sailors opened an iron box that had been bolted to the ship. Out floated a rope with numerous bobbars attached, and once these were out of the ship, they immediately made their way toward the water's surface. These weren't the only contraptions that Regis had set up, but a number had been destroyed in the bombardment.

The work continued, and one by one, ropes fastened with weights and bobbars were released around the wreckage. The sailors were working as instructed, but even they didn't understand the purpose of what they were doing.

By the time their preparations were finished and they were leaving on their raft, a gentle light was shining over the eastern horizon.

This isn't good... High Britannia's patrol is definitely going to find us!

They had preemptively dressed as fishermen just in case, but that wasn't enough to fully ease Regis's concerns. The patrol ship came up to them, and following a very tense exchange, decided that they were harmless and went on its way. At that moment, every sailor on the raft offered their thanks to God.



The sky brightened, and the colors of the morning sun dyed the eastern mountain ridge.

Their third rendezvous point being a small island northwest of the bay, Belgaria's Western Liberation Fleet departed and began making their way southeast. Just as Narissa had told Regis, a strong wind blew from the southwest to the northeast during this time of year, which meant they were currently moving perpendicular to it.

With the morning wind filling their sails, they headed toward the bay. Their vanguard was headed by four Aeterna-class ships, but the fleet had unloaded their food supplies and messenger ships, dumped their excess gunpowder and

shells, and lowered the number of sailors to the absolute minimum. What was usually a five-hundred person ship now carried only three hundred.

This hadn't been done to minimize the number of casualties, but rather to increase the speed at which their ships could travel—even if just by a marginal amount. Their plan relied on how quickly they could move, so they had gotten rid of as much excess weight as possible.

In addition to this, eight Urathenos-classes were also being used—ships they had been deliberately preserving up to that point. They had twenty at their disposal that Bertram had called from the surrounding seas, but these were ships designed to preserve public order, not engage in wars; one shot would be enough to take them out of commission, and their cannons were useless against a Princess-class. This was why they had initially been removed from the battle.

And so, four Aeterna-classes and eight Urathenos-classes led the way, proceeding in two columns. The remainder of the fleet followed at a distance—two Aeterna-classes, fourteen Sererne-classes, and twelve Urathenos-classes.

This was a considerable fighting force, but expending them in this battle would hinder Belgaria's ability to protect its coastal waters henceforth. Perhaps their port would be occupied by another foreign power, or their merchant ships attacked by pirates. The Empire was already being run thin by High Britannia, so a financial crisis would hit especially hard.

What's more, defeating the enemy ships and taking back the port wasn't the only thing they had to consider; the Belgarian Army existed to protect the livelihood of the nation's citizens, so by having to rely on their reserves' firepower, they would essentially be fighting a losing battle.

In the cabin of the new flagship, the Brouillard—

The bay was still some distance away. Regis was holed up in the conference room, seated at a wide table with a number of chairs. He had discovered that sitting down and talking as much as possible made him a lot less likely to get seasick.

Altina, the only other person in the room, let out a drowsy yawn. She had apparently stayed awake until the crack of dawn, waiting for Regis to return. He had left without a word and so had been sure that she'd be quite annoyed, but surprisingly, she didn't complain in the slightest. Rather, she commended the work that Regis and the sailors who accompanied him had done.

Looks like Altina's maturing more by the day, Regis thought, as insolent as it was. He exchanged looks with the woman now wiping sleep-induced tears from her eyes.

"Mn? Is there something on my face?" Altina asked.

"No..."

Regis had inadvertently ended up staring at her again. He knew that bringing up last night again would make her scold him for sure, so he was definitely reluctant to rehash the topic.

"Err... I was just thinking that you're pretty calm about all this."

"Of course I am. When we're out on the sea, there isn't much I can do myself."

"We're all the same in that regard. A ship can't move without delegating duties."

"Yeah, that's right. And when I see that, I can't help but think..."

"About what?"

"You see... In battle, I always thought I belonged at the very front, leading the charge. But maybe that's not always true."

Regis's eyes shot wide open. "...Have you come down with a fever?"

"Talk about rude!"

"Oh, no, sorry. But I'm always telling you not to run ahead of your guards, and you never listen to me. I just thought it was quite sudden."

"Erk, well... True... This doesn't mean I plan to stay huddled at the rear all the time, though. I just figured that delegating duties and working together would probably be important in land battles, too. Guards have their own duties, right?"

By running off ahead, I'm exposing them to danger. I mean, what happened to Eric was all because I..."

Altina's guard officer Eric had lunged at an enemy to protect her, only to be wounded in the counterattack. He was currently recuperating at Fort Volks, but had he not been injured, he would have undoubtedly joined their campaign.

Silence fell over the room as Altina became lost in her thoughts, only muttering the occasional word. Her expression looked so mature for someone who had only just recently turned fifteen. Her sights were set on the emperor's throne, and to realize this goal she would need to triumph over her political enemies. But more importantly, she would need to grow as a person. While she thought of and acted for the people, someone who was virtuous and honest to a fault wouldn't be suited to rule.

Regis was beyond pleased that participating in this battle had proven to be a good experience for Altina. In that moment, as he stared at the dazzling growth of the young imperial princess, his anxiety over the approaching enemy ships and the fatigue that made his body feel heavy seemed to disappear.

The door leading outside opened, and Sparke the adjutant stepped in with a salute. "Admiral, isn't it about time that you came out on deck?"

Regis was only an admiral proxy, but simplicity was best on the battlefield; the extra time it took to address him with an extended title could be time used to save a life. That was why the adjutant simply called him "Admiral." But even then, every time that Regis was addressed as such, he would think, *That's far too much for me.*

"...Y-Yes. Thank you. I'll be there at once."

"Sir!" At that, Sparke went back outside.

Altina stood and exited the cabin, with Regis following close behind. Outside, a turbulent wind blew.

"Once you get used to it, the salty breeze is actually pretty nice!"

"...Right."

As his adjutant was present, Regis knew that he needed to watch how he

spoke and only refer to Altina by her royal title.

Altina could feel the wind blowing toward them from the front of the ship. “Sails sure are peculiar,” she observed. “How is it that we can keep going forward even though the wind’s blowing against us?”

“...Oh, just because you can feel the wind coming in from the front, it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s blowing in that direction. When the ship is moving forward, it will naturally feel like you’re going against it, you know— Uh, I mean, Your Highness.”

“Oh, really?”

“If you want to know which way the wind’s *actually* blowing, look at the streamer on top of the mast. Right now... Ah, yes. It’s blowing diagonally from that direction.”

“So it *is* coming in from the front!”

“Err... This is a principle from the thesis of a scholar called Bernoulli, written about a hundred years ago. Apparently, an increase in the speed of a fluid means a decrease in static pressure. Have you ever heard about that before?”

“What fluid are we talking about here?”

“In this case, it would be the air.”

“Then just call it air! Why do you always have to overcomplicate things!?”

“Ah, no... It applies to the air, but ‘fluid’ is a term that speaks to its physical properties. I think it’s an appropriate expression.”

“Hmph.” Altina pursed her lips.

Regis resigned himself and decided to try again. “This explanation may take a while, but... First, you need to angle the sail so that the wind comes in from behind. Even when it blows from the front of the ship—or rather, diagonally from the front—we can still move forward so long as the sail puffs up. That means it’s generating lift.

“Now, that’s where the shape of the ship comes into play. Its broadside is wide and nearly flat, while its prow is narrow and pointed. Let’s say the sail is moving the ship sideways—the wide broadside is pushed against the water,

making it hard for the ship to stray to the sides. This movement cancels out, and only the forward force remains. And since that part of the ship is pointed, it splits the sea as it moves, right? As a result, the ship can move even when the wind is moving diagonally from the front. Though it does push us sideways a little.”

And so, it is indeed possible to move against the wind, Regis concluded in his head. Though, that said, it was still theoretically impossible when the angle to the wind was less than forty-five degrees. In fact, when a sail took the wind head-on, worst-case scenario, it could rupture.

Regis wasn't sure whether Altina had understood, but she gave an impressed nod.

“Still, going against the wind is always difficult, no matter the ship,” Regis continued. “Remember when we were retreating along the coast yesterday? We were nearly taking headwind, so the enemy was getting closer and closer.”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“A sailing ship is valued higher the closer it can get to taking the wind head-on. But when a ship is this large, it isn't so—”

“A ship!”

A voice suddenly came down from the crow's nest, causing Regis to look into the distance. There was a single ship in sight, and a small one at that.

Not only was the crow's nest atop the mast a much better vantage point than anywhere on deck, but the lookout used a telescope. Thanks to that, he was able to discern that the small ship spotted was an allied vessel that had been dispatched for recon. They could even make out the flag signals it was sending.

“It seems to be an allied recon ship,” the adjutant reported. “*Ahem...* They report that there are no enemies in the vicinity. The coast is clear all the way to the mouth of the bay, sir!”

“The enemy kept their patrols to the area around the bay...” Regis mumbled to himself. “I see, I see... So that's their decision.”

Sparke smiled, though his nervousness was clear on his face. “The enemy

must have expected us to come from the southwest. We did so yesterday, and it's standard for a sailing ship to come from the windward direction."

"...You think so? I would have put the chances at fifty-fifty."

"Really!?"

"It's important to defy the enemy's expectations... But as long as they don't intercept us outside the bay, it shouldn't make much difference whether or not they know which direction we're coming from."

"Do you think they have a ship stationed outside the bay?"

"It won't be much of an issue if they do. But if we end up getting pincered, we'll suffer a considerable number of casualties."

"That certainly sounds dangerous..."

"That's precisely why we kept up our reconnaissance, though."

"Of course!"

The ship ahead wasn't the only one—more than twenty small recon vessels had been sent to watch the area around the bay. Their surveillance net had been established and maintained since immediately after the previous day's battle, and while this did require some sacrifice, it provided enough beneficial information to compensate.

It was then that a voice once again sounded from the crow's nest. "Enemy ship spotted! It's a patrol boat!"

"What do we do, Admiral!?" the adjutant asked in a panic. Altina looked similarly anxious.

Regis gave a calm nod. "It's all right. Unlike patrols on land, patrols at sea are quite meaningless during point-defense operations."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"On land, scouting is usually done by an unarmored soldier on a fast horse. The moment they spot the enemy, they can hurry back to report it. Meanwhile, the enemy unit is generally composed of much slower-moving foot soldiers, giving their opponent time to prepare to intercept them. This patrol boat,

however, is a sailing ship just like us; unlike on land, there's no considerable speed difference between us."

"Oh, I see!"

Even if an enemy patrol had spotted them, the report likely wouldn't arrive quickly enough for it to be a problem.

"The only issue is... the patrol boat could be faster than expected," Regis murmured.

But his concerns were met with a laugh by the captain of the Brouillard. This man was a rare find, to say the least—considerably overweight in a military mostly composed of soldiers who were lean and muscular. He most likely did have a good amount of muscle hidden beneath his flab, though his short stature only added to his overall round physique.

The captain was currently gripping the helm himself.

"Hohohoho! No need to worry! My precious Brouillard won't lose to the likes of that dinghy! I'd bet my bacon on it!"

I'll have to refuse, thanks. Especially seeing as you're already chewing on it...

But, the bacon aside, the captain was right in that the ships were going at about the same speed. In fact, the Brouillard was slowly overtaking its competition.

Regis was impressed. "I see. This is really quite something..."

"Hohoho! Want me to spill the beans on how it's done?"

"...Superior seakeeping, perhaps?"

"Oh!? You guessed it! Nice work, Admiral! The waves are pretty high today, so a small ship like that's too busy moving up and down."

"Haha... Well, whatever the case, please keep at it."

"Understood!"

The captain was certainly a jolly man. Regis wasn't particularly good with people who had strong personalities, but the man's carefree attitude thankfully made him quite easy to talk to. It was quite a load off Regis's mind when he was

surrounded by people he didn't know.

By the time the sun had fully risen over the eastern mountain ridge, Épée Prière Bay was in sight.



The clang of alarm bells resounded through the air, signaling an enemy raid. A massive roar like that of a ravenous beast boomed from the hull as the steam engine started up.

In the cabin of the Princess-class Garnet, Morins peeked his head out of the captain's quarters. "Good grief, could they shut up for a second?"

He left the conference room dining hall just as his adjutant, Laurelin, was coming in from the bridge. "You haven't finished changing yet, Captain!" she exclaimed.

"Mn? Whoops. Forgot my pants."

"You're not a sailor, so please don't go out on deck dressed like that. If the admiral sees you—"

"I'll have a gorilla scolding me again?"

"One of these days, he's going to flat-out open fire on you, you know."

"Hehehe... Well, we wouldn't want that."

Laurelin raced into the captain's quarters, then returned holding the pants that Morins had previously thrown onto the floor. "You're not leaving until you put these on."

"All right! Put 'em on me, then!"

"Do it yourself!" she shot back, her voice sharp. And before Morins could protest any further, his trousers had been shoved into his hands.

"C'mon, don't be so cold. It's just the raid bell. You don't have to be so on edge."

"Then let me ask you this, Captain—when are *you* ever on edge?"

"...When I go home, usually."

Laurelin hung her head forward in despair, resting her face in her palms. It took her muttering the Lord's name in vain five times before Morins realized that he would not be receiving any assistance, at which point he hoisted up his pants himself and securely tightened his belt.

"All right!"

"According to the report, they are attacking with four Aeterna-classes... as well as a few smaller ships," Laurelin said.

"Those are probably their scouting ships. They sure do have a hard worker at the helm. If that's how they operate, if we'd positioned a single ship outside the bay, it would have probably been surrounded."

"Then you should be thankful that the admiral made a sound decision."

"Oi, don't underestimate me. I knew that textbook gorilla wasn't gonna employ any new schemes; I just said that for the sake of saying it."

"Err... Then what plan would you find more appropriate, Captain?"

"It's obvious. Some idiot thought it was a good idea to protect this many cargo ships with only six warships, and look what happened—two of 'em have already croaked. We should have evacuated last night."

"...Th-The admiral would never agree to that."

"They'd call me a coward, sure. End of story. Worst-case scenario, I'd even be a traitor. But look here, Laurelin—no matter how much that little shit Oswald might win on land, his tactical superiority relies solely on the latest guns and cannons. These cargo ships are his lifeline in this war. If you want to control the seas, you need huge ships of the line. Cargo vessels can be replaced, sure, but a ship like ours can't be found just anywhere."

"There should be another three Princess-classes at the port in Queenstower..."

"If they sent those out, we'd be leaving the capital in the hands of tattered old ships on the edge of retirement. It'd be basically unprotected. You think Parliament would accept that?"

Laurelin looked dissatisfied with Morins's explanation, but intentionally

changed the subject nonetheless. “Whatever the case, Captain, we need you on deck *now*.”

“Right. We’ll have to continue this discussion tonight... in bed.”

“Take this seriously, okay?”

“My advances are *always* serious, you know?”

“.....”

You know, having a beauty glare at me like this ain’t so bad, Morins found himself thinking. He stepped out onto the deck and gave the order to prepare for battle, but his words were largely unnecessary; the enemy ships were already visible at the mouth of the bay, so even the most optimistic of sailors were already sprinting for their stations.

It wasn’t long before the first and fifth ships were ready to go. Flag signals were already being waved.

“Captain! We’ve received the attack order!” Laurelin called out.

“Yeah, well, my men are the best, so no need to panic.”

The engine room where the steam engine operated was several floors below the deck, so sending a messenger there to deliver every order would take far too long and ultimately cause delays. That was where the device next to the helm—one that looked like a skewered barrel—showed its worth.

This device was known as the engine order telegraph, and, as the name suggested, it was used to send orders to the engine room. The engineers could also use the device to report back. It was so noisy in the engine room that they needed to rely on it, but reporting to other areas on the ship was much simpler; they could simply use the iron pipes called speaking tubes that ran all around the ship to verbally converse.

Thanks to these various devices, it was possible for the captain to carry out all his duties in the bridge where he was protected by a sturdy deck, rather than having to stay outside where the view was better but there was a much greater risk of getting shot. Though perhaps Morins wasn’t actually taking command in the first place. Instead, he simply watched.

The helmsman made the call. "Garnet, setting sail!"

"Righty-o," Morins replied.

Moving the ship was a job generally left to the crew.

With the way that Morins handled things, Laurelin had made a number of complaints back when she had first been instated: "You're violating navy regulations. You're slacking on the job. This is a dereliction of duties." But she was used to it all now. Without losing her mind or making a ruckus, she simply glared at Morins with cold eyes.

"How exhilarating."

A bombardment one day, and a sortie the next. Morins knew that he wouldn't come out of this confrontation unharmed. He was already receiving reports about flooding and breakdowns, but such matters weren't his problem to deal with; it was the engineers who kept the engine running, the gunners who handled the necessary measurements, and the accountants who rationed out the war provisions. What's more, with six hundred crew members, there were some who were in the doctor's care before the battle had even begun. Out of everyone on board, Morins was undoubtedly the one with the most free time.

There was a relatively large, tall table in the bridge, but no chair accompanying it. This was the captain's post, and there was a sea chart spread across the tabletop. The chart had been marked with chalk; the enemy fleet's route was more northerly than it had been the day before.

After receiving a message from the lookout via speaking tube, Laurelin reported back to Morins. "Enemy ships turning port! 3800 yards (3475 m) from our flagship!"

"Hey now, you're saying they made the first move?" Morins asked, his brow furrowed.

This development was a surprise to Laurelin as well. She asked the lookout to verify, before turning back to Morins. "...There's no mistake about it, Captain. The enemy ships are moving in two columns, one front and one back. The front column is crossing from left to right... Perhaps they're trying to outflank us?"

"Sure, that might be an option if their ships moved twice as fast as ours. But

even if they had the wind on their side, steam ships can still move faster in the bay.”

“The enemy formation is four Aeterna-classes in the front, and eight Urathenos-classes in the rear. Do they intend to engage in crossfire?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The likes of the Urathenos-class couldn’t be relied on in battle. Ships of that class were primarily made to rescue stranded personnel and apprehend smugglers.

Fundamentally, a ship of the line fought at close enough range that it could turn its broadside to the enemy and unleash its cannons. It was thus possible for even a less powerful vessel to fire a devastating barrage at point-blank range, so long as it crossed paths with an enemy. But with the Princess-classes’ superior firing range, the Queen’s Navy had no reason to play along with these antics.

As long as they could maneuver themselves to a position where only their shots could reach, and then maintain that distance from the enemy, then High Britannia would seize a one-sided victory. Granted, they couldn’t fall back very far since they were in a narrow bay with the cargo ships they needed to protect behind them, but the enemy would surely be annihilated well before that became a concern.

“...Was this an error on their part?” Laurelin muttered to herself.

“You’d think so under normal circumstances... Given their shorter range, the Empire’s ships would have to wait until we showed our broadside and started opening fire on them. But even from there, they would need to advance quite a distance before they could return fire themselves. Like what they managed yesterday.”

“Do you reckon they’ve changed commanders?”

Perhaps... Morins thought. But something didn’t sit right with him. “The person commanding this fleet has to be the admiral who so cleverly took out two of our Princess-classes. Would he approve of this move? Or what, did God speak to him in his dreams last night?”

The air shook. Cannons roared.

Once again, Laurelin relayed a report from the lookout. “The enemy has opened fire, but their shots are falling short.”

“This is nonsense... Not only have they turned too soon, they’re courteously showing us their firing range.”

“Isn’t this a good opportunity for us?”

“It is. We’d normally turn starboard the moment the enemy entered our range, since their shots still won’t reach us from that distance.”

By forcing a prolonged engagement while maintaining an advantageous distance, High Britannia could fight off the enemy’s main forces almost effortlessly. And an admiral as devoted to the textbook as Oxford would never let such a perfect opportunity slip by.

Morins prodded at the map in frustration. “What’s their admiral thinking? It’s shady as hell how they’re serving us our next moves like a full-course meal.”

“You’re right... Oh, the flagship is turning! They’re turning starboard!”

“Yep. That’s exactly what the gorilla would do.”

Though he wasn’t the only one; no admiral would ever hesitate to seize the chance they had just been afforded. And unlike yesterday, they were nowhere near the cape, this time staying right by the center of the bay. No matter what trap the Empire might have had in store, it surely could not pose any threat so long as High Britannia stayed out of range.

“Slow the engine! Full starboard!” Morins shouted. “And keep your distance! Being escorted like this really rubs me the wrong way.”

“Yes, sir!”

The helmsman pulled the lever on the engine order telegraph, signaling for the engine room to slow the ship. At the same time, he turned the wheel to the right; instead of them following the flagship, their route drew a parallel line further back.

I’d actually rather have turned in the opposite direction, but... I don’t know what kind of excuse I could make for that.

The bombardment began—a one-sided assault from afar. Morins watched the battle unfold from the small window in the bridge, though nothing particularly unusual seemed to be happening.

Am I just overthinking things?

The first and fifth ships were firing their cannons with the utmost enthusiasm, while the eighth ship was lagging behind a little. The ninth ship—that is, Morins’s—was even farther back, enough that he doubted their shells would reach the enemy were they to open fire now.

And then, from the window, he saw the flagship suddenly turn. In the midst of an engagement, it was common practice for ships to constantly zig-zag so that the enemy could not grasp their exact distance away, but there was no need to do this when the enemy cannons couldn’t hit.

Despite that, the flagship turned so sharply that its hull lurched to one side. It was severe enough that one wrong order would be enough to capsize it.

The hell is MacCunn doing!?

Morins glared at the map again. “I see! It’s the wreckage!” he exclaimed, remembering the massive ship of the line that had been sunk there the previous day.

Laurelin tilted her head. “Right, that’s where the Empire’s Poseidam sank yesterday... But did they really think we were such poor handlers that we would crash into it?”

“Hm... Right...?”

They may have been in the midst of combat, but the bay was vast; there were plenty of ways to avoid a shipwreck. What’s more, it was likely only the masts of the sunken ship that would have been able to touch any boat traveling above it. The flagship seemed to have panicked a little, having been late to notice the sunken vessel, but it ultimately managed to navigate the danger zone without issue.

In the end, the wreckage hardly posed an issue. As it should be.

The Belgarian Navy’s turn a bizarre distance away and their seemingly

unsuccessful cannon fire had been brilliant in luring the flagship to that precise location, but... all in all, it seemed rather pointless.

Was the tactician so caught up in his own plan that he didn't consider the logistics? While things still didn't quite sit right with Morins, he breathed a sigh of relief.

The next moment, the flagship suddenly dropped speed, as though it had been grabbed by a giant hand.

"What!?"

"Huh...? Did it... hit the sunken ship!?"

"Even then, it wouldn't slow down like that! A scrape would, at worst, open a hole in the bottom!"

Damage to a ship's underside was quite serious, but would not result in such a sudden drop in speed. Morins couldn't piece it together; his vision was too constricted in the bridge, and there were no reports from the lookout.

Before he knew it, his legs were moving almost by themselves. He raced up the stairs and pushed open the door to the deck. Paying no mind to the questioning looks he was getting from the sailors, he dashed to the portside guard rail, yanking the telescope from his belt and focusing it on the flagship.

"What happened!?" he yelled.

Laurelin followed a few paces behind. "Calm down, Captain! Perhaps they slowed down to match the enemy."

"That ain't it. The Princess-class isn't capable of deceleration like that. They must've caught on something... Hm? Oi! Isn't there something in the water there!?"

"What!? I don't see anything..."

"Bring us closer to the flagship! But not too close!"

"I'll pass the message on!"

Laurelin ran off as Morins continued to glare at the flagship. Its sailors were gathered at the stern, and a number were climbing the shroud of the mast.

Looks like they're unfurling the sail. Has their engine broken down?

The fifth ship commanded by Barrister passed by the flagship's side, while the eighth ship led by Orsen waited behind the stalled vessel like a faithful dog. As expected, since he didn't know the reason the ship had suddenly stopped, he wasn't going to be a fool and risk getting too close.

"Ah, that ain't good!"

If they remained stationary, it wasn't as though the enemy was going to sit and wait for them. Finally taking the tailwind, the Empire's fleet circled around the front.

Good grief, what a day... Morins cursed. It was more his style to drink tea and leave everything to his subordinates, so why was he running around the deck like some fresh recruit? He burst back into the bridge, barking orders.

"Engine at full throttle! Take a hard right! Come on!"

"Aye aye, Captain!"

Perplexed by this unforeseen situation, the helmsman pushed the engine telegraph lever to its very limit and turned the wheel with all his might.

"Captain, the lookout says he can see rope!" Laurelin reported.

"I'll need more than that," Morins replied, before personally approaching the speaking tube. "It's Morins! Talk to me!"

"Reporting from the top! I see something like a rope in the water, near the stern of the flagship!"

"And what do you think it is!?"

"It might be from the sunken ship's anchor! It's tangled around the propeller!"

"Shit!"

"Another thing! The fifth ship is heading toward the enemy fleet!"

"Goddammit, Barrister! Is he asking to be shot?"

It appeared Barrister was brazenly closing the distance to the enemy fleet, which had now formed a line of battle. He probably intended to barge into the

enemy and bombard them from close range, though he himself would likely take a few hits before he reached them. With his superior firepower, however, there was a chance that he would be able to take out four or five ships before going down.

Certainly, if no one took assertive action, the immobile flagship would be a prime target. It couldn't even turn its broadside to fire the cannons.

The Garnet turned to direct its cannons at the enemy, but Barrister's ship was between them; Morins couldn't give the order to begin a bombardment lest his ally be caught in the crossfire.

Meanwhile, the eighth ship managed by Orsen seemed to have made a similar decision. It went out ahead of the flagship to cover it, though its cannons remained silent.

Hold on a sec, Morins thought, didn't we take on this exact formation right after the fourth and sixth ships were taken out?



On the quarterdeck of the Brouillard, the flagship of the Western Liberation Fleet, Regis leaned his elbows against the starboard guard rail and watched the enemy ships. Only Altina was beside him, as the adjutant was running to the flagman to transmit the next order.

"Are you the reason their flagship stopped, Regis?" Altina asked.

"Yeah. I had some of our sailors send up ropes from the Poseidam."

"How does that work? Do ships get tangled in rope?"

"It wouldn't have any impact on a sailing ship, but steam ships use a screw propeller—a device that generates thrust by pushing the surrounding water behind the ship. Now think about it—for a ship as large as a Princess-class to move even faster than cavalry, just how much seawater must it be pushing out? And if it's pushing water out, it must be sucking in just as much."

"That sounds like a lot of water."

"The screw sucks in everything that's in the water, too. Even ropes with bobbers attached."

“So a rope is enough to stop it.”

“Well, depending on how you use it. You couldn’t use rope to tie a ship down, for example; the rope would snap. But the screw is delicate. If rope wraps around its axle, the burden becomes far greater than what it would usually experience when turning on the open sea, and it ultimately breaks... like a sword slammed into a tree trunk.”

Altina pouted. “What a specific example. But I think I understand.”

“Hahaha... The hardest part about putting this trap to work was that we had to sneak across and under the sea at night, but I’m glad it worked out.”

“I’m surprised you even managed to find the shipwreck.”

“We set up a few floating landmarks beforehand, but it definitely isn’t easy to search underwater by moonlight. Thankfully we could just follow the cords down to the hull, and at that point, all we needed to do was close our eyes and make it to the contraptions.”

At the time, the sailors had reported that several parts had been broken during the bombardment, so it was a trial and a half actually getting into the ship.

“Did you take a dip too, Regis?”

“Do you really think I’d be capable of swimming without a sound, like a fish, or staying underwater for close to five minutes?”

“Ahaha... Maybe not. It’d be hard to swim against all the waves, too.”

“...Bold of you to assume that I can swim at all.”

“Oh dear.”

“I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve nearly drowned in a washbasin before.”

“Eh? You mean when you were a kid, right?”

Regis let out a dry laugh. “Y-Yeah... Right. It was *definitely* before I was an adult. Yup.”

Altina pointed to the immobile enemy ship. “So, are we going to commandeer that thing? You’re going to borrow—or rather, you’re going to *steal* the enemy

ship, aren't you?"

"...I would absolutely love to have it. If we were able to get our hands on such a high-performance ship of the line, you could hardly ask for a more reliable ally, and it would serve as a good reference for the Empire to produce ships on the same level. But there's one little problem with that... Our trap destroyed the propeller, and that probably can't be repaired with the Empire's current technology."

"Seriously? Then it's completely pointless!"

"So while we *could* capture it, the crucial engine won't work. That's why that ship isn't the one we're after."

"Then what are we—?"

"Admiral!" Altina was abruptly cut off as the adjutant returned, immediately raising his voice. "An enemy ship is headed straight for us!"

"Yes, I can see that."

The fifth Princess-class was approaching them, having breezed past High Britannia's now immobile flagship. It presumably intended to carry out a close-range bombardment.

"Then open fire!" Altina exclaimed, pointing toward the oncoming vessel. "We have to sink it!"

"No need. We already have a plan in place."

"Ah... Sorry. The admiral should be giving the orders, not me."

"Ha. Don't worry about— I mean, your concern is unwarranted, ma'am."

Altina gloomily turned away, so Regis offered a smile in an attempt to reassure her.

The adjutant opened his eyes wide. "I don't mean to be rude, but... you're a peculiar one, Admiral."

"...You mean the fact that I haven't been sacked yet?"

"N-Nothing of the sort! I mean how you're able to speak so casually when such a strong ship is headed toward us. I've aided three admirals in my time,

but not one has ever cracked a smile while we were fighting at sea.”

Regis thought back. *Now that I think about it, I don't think I ever saw Admiral Bertram smile...*

“...Personally, I don't feel like I'm doing anything particularly special. The fact of the matter is, we're not in a situation where we have anything to fear. I already told you the plan, didn't I?”

“Yes! Th-That's the ship there!”

Weaving through the line of four Aeterna-classes was a single Urathenos-class ship, sailing out to intercept the approaching vessel. It was on a collision course, set to ram straight into its front.

Altina leaned out. “What are you doing!?”

“Please stand back, Princess. It's dangerous. You might get hit by the debris.”

“Eh?”

The Princess-class possessed extraordinary speed for a warship; while the Urathenos-class could match its pace, it fell short in every other aspect. The distance between the two was closed in no time at all.

“Regis, you're crashing that ship into it?”

“That's right. Well, the Urathenos-class is small and doesn't have a ram, so I can't imagine the suicide attack will prove particularly effective.”

Urathenos-class ships were less than half the size of a Princess-class, so it was the equivalent of a child ramming into an adult.

“Say again...? There are people on board, right!?”

“They already know to jump overboard before it collides.”

That being said, the helmsman had to stay at the wheel until the very last moment or else their ship would be avoided. All Regis could do was leave it up to their good judgment.

“Are the cannons not enough?”

“Even with the firepower of our four Aeterna-classes, if a Princess-class crosses the T here, there's a chance that some of our ships will be taken out.

We can't risk losing any more warships. And we'll have to put on a show, too."

"Put on a show'?"

"There was a scene that I read in a book once. Now I'm going to have the people over there experience it, too."

At those words, Regis smiled sweetly across the sea.



Laurelin brought a new report to Morins. "A single Urathenos-class is approaching the fifth ship!"

"What...? More of their nonsense. What on earth is the Empire's admiral thinking?"

Morins's head was starting to hurt. Both ships were capable of moving at great speeds, and if they collided, neither would come out completely unscathed. That said, the Princess-class was by no means brittle enough to sink from a single collision with a ship half its size.

Surely the enemy knew that too. They had to. They weren't even firing at the fifth Princess-class as it approached their fleet. The way things were going now, the Urathenos-class would simply be knocked aside, and Barrister would be able to freely unload his cannons at close range. Perhaps his ship alone would be enough to wipe out the enemy's main fighting force.

"Good grief... Is Barrister going for a Cross?"

"I never knew you had an interest in medals, Captain."

"Well, they double your reward, and my pockets are feeling rather empty."

"Are you sure you should be acting so carefree...?"

"For now, I can only watch. There's nothing else I can do."

The fifth ship had repositioned itself, accounting for the course it would take once it had approached the enemy. But as long as there was an ally in the general vicinity, Morins was not allowed to fire. The Queen's Navy and the Belgian Navy had formed their lines of battle, with the two ships closed in between them.

Morins could already foresee the small Urathenos-class being completely pulverized beneath the Princess-class's hull, and every other onlooker surely expected the same. Those on the small vessel began jumping from its deck, as though fleeing a sinking ship.

A shiver shot down Morins's spine. *Is this another trap?*

The tip of the fifth ship stabbed into the Urathenos-class's prow, piercing slightly off center. It was as though the two ships were rubbing cheeks. Naturally, it was nearly completely one-sided; the Urathenos-class's prow crumbled, its mast collapsed, and the hull was torn board from board. Morins was certain that the fifth ship would press through without issue.

Then, the next instant, he was blinded by a dazzling flash. An explosion. Its impact was so great, he could feel it from the bridge.

"...!?"

The window he was looking through had cracked. The sailors raised screams. His heart pulsed as though someone had smacked him awake. He could feel his blood practically burning through his veins.

What happened!? Right, an explosion. The fifth ship's prow is...

The Urathenos-class had exploded, and black smoke plumed from where it had once stood. By now, its hull had practically left the corporeal realm. The area around the fifth ship's prow, of course, was completely gone as well.

Perhaps the impact had ignited the gunpowder used for the cannons, as a number of smaller explosions followed. But the fifth Princess-class sank before the flames could cause any considerable damage. Even a ship that had been split in two wouldn't sink that fast; it was practically a drinking glass thrown in the bay.

Barrister's sailors had no time to jump overboard. In but a brief instant, a large warship had completely vanished.

Morins was at a total loss for words. His aide and the other sailors were the same. The ship that lashed at the enemy's line of battle had been removed as easily as a chess piece from a board.

Finally, Laurelin ran to the speaking tube. “All stations, report your situation! Is our ship in one piece!?”

Her voice finally brought the men to their senses, and Morins quickly made his way to the helmsman. “How’s the engine room!?”

“Confirming it now...” the helmsman replied. “All right! We’re good to go!”

“That’s good.”

“Captain, the enemy flagship is sending signals!” Laurelin cried out, her arms clasp- ing the speaking tube.

“Can’t say I didn’t see this coming...”

Through the glass of the small broken window, Morins read the message from the enemy ship: *Halt. Surrender and we will not attack.*

Morins nodded. “I see, I see... Screw that.”

“You plan to fight, Captain!?”

“Laurelin, dear Laurelin. Are you being serious? We’re getting the hell outta here!”

“What!?”

“We’re faster than them. You think we can compete with that!? Full speed! Full starboard! Get us to the edge of the bay!”

“Aye aye, sir!” the helmsman answered.

“You can’t!” Laurelin exclaimed, hurriedly stepping in front of Morins. “Our cargo ships are still in the port! Our flagship is still out of action!”

“And what about it!? Only our and Orsen’s ships remain!”

“Two Princess-classes should be enough to take out four Aeterna-classes...”

“Then what about the ships behind them? Did you see what happened to Barrister?”

“That’s... But if we lose the ships at the port, what happens to our supply chain...?”

Seeing how insistent Laurelin was that they stand their ground, Morins

prodded her in the chest. “Listen to me, Laurelin. You’re clever. You should have realized by now that I prioritize the lives of myself and my crew above all else.”

“...We’re going to lose this war.”

“And we can think about that once we’re safe. Keep her steady! Take us into the open sea!”

A dry cannon blast echoed in the distance. Morins looked to see that the eighth ship behind him had opened fire. Its captain had chosen not to run nor accept the surrender; it was going to face the challenge. Orsen hadn’t been handpicked by the Queen for nothing—his loyalty truly was splendid.

Laurelin stared at Morins reproachfully, but he simply shrugged. “...I’m sorry. Orsen might be a martyr, but I’m not.”

“They’ll call you a coward if you run.”

“Let them say what they want. I don’t care. I just—”

At that, Morins frowned, finally looking away from Laurelin’s cold, glaring blue eyes. He had deliberately swallowed his next words.

...I just don’t want to let you die.

He couldn’t say it. He knew that she would blame herself.

And so, the ninth Princess-class, the Garnet, picked up speed as it approached the mouth of the bay.





Morins opened his eyes wide. “Hm? Hey, what’s that?”

A sudden cold sweat ran down his spine. They had apparently been hidden in the shadows of the cape on both sides. In other words, they’d pulled a fast one on him.

Morins mustered a dry laugh. “Hah... So I’ve been following his script the whole time? He saw right through me? Shit. How’d you manage it, you bloody imperial devil...?” At that, he yanked the captain’s hat from his head and slammed it against the floor.

A hysteric report from the lookout stand turned the helmsman’s face pale. Laurelin went a similar shade of white, like a ghost, and her knees almost gave out beneath her.

“That... can’t...” she muttered. “How could they...?”

But before she could finish, the door to the bridge swung open, and in rushed an out-of-breath sailor. He was the flagman charged with sending signals, and had perhaps raced over upon receiving no response from the speaking tube.

“Hah... Hah... Captain... Enemy...” the sailor panted.

“Yes, I see them. Unfortunately.”

“Two Aeterna-classes... and over twenty other ships...”

“Imperial bastards. Have they gathered every ship from the surrounding waters?”

“Most of them are small crafts, but...”

Had he not just witnessed such an unexpected show of strength, Morins knew that he would have given the order to charge straight ahead, fully convinced that his foe stood no chance. He had just moments ago been certain that the Princess-class’s overwhelming performance could break through this encirclement, but that was of course no longer the case.

“That’s even worse,” he sighed. “They may be small, but if we crash into them, we’ll get blown sky high. Well, there’s a chance that we will, at least.

There's no guarantee we'll go down like Barrister, but... do you really want to take that risk?"

"Err... Um..."

"That was a joke. Can you imagine me ordering a do-or-die resistance after what we just saw? My subordinates would shoot me before the enemy even got a chance."

"That's not—"

"Oh, I'm very sure it is."

The eighth Princess-class's cannon fire had already ceased. It hadn't sunk, but there was less smoke than usual coming from its smokestacks; it seemed that their steam engine had already been shut off.

Morins walked up to the helmsman, putting his hands on the man's shoulders and pushing him aside.

"Ah, Captain..."

"I'll do it."

He grabbed the lever of the engine order telegraph. One pull would send the command. It was as easy as that. But he would surely never forget the resistance that he felt as he did so.

Stop the engine.

Morins looked over at the flagman, who had stopped dead in his tracks, and gave a bitter smile over a sigh. "...While I'm at it, you want me to raise the white flag?"

The Empire



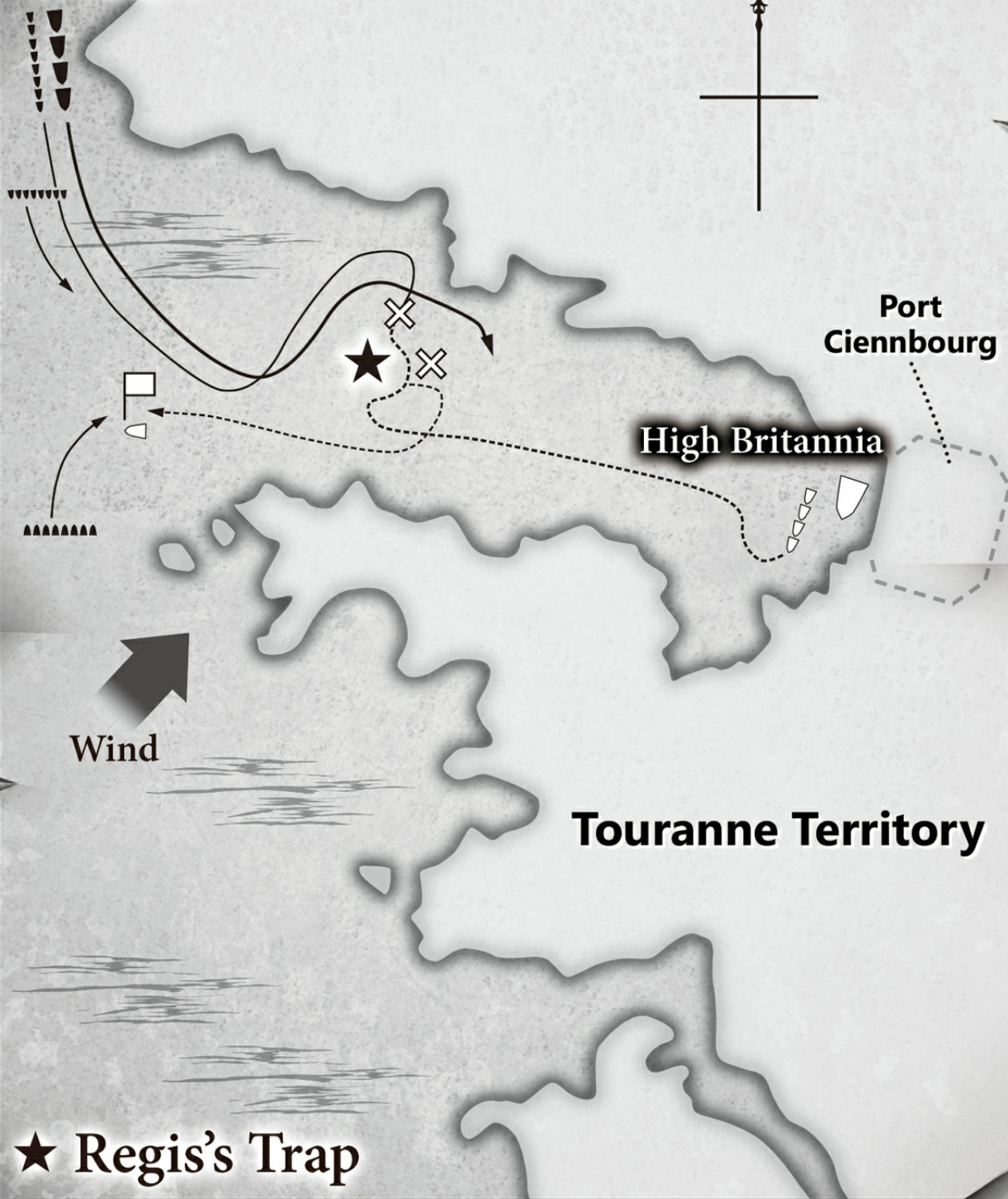
Port
Ciennbourg

High Britannia

Wind

Touranne Territory

★ Regis's Trap





“...I hope we’ve made it in time.”

The cargo ships at the port surrendered without any resistance as Regis and Altina disembarked from the Brouillard onto a reclaimed harbor.

Likely owing to pulling an all-nighter and skipping breakfast, Regis was feeling terribly seasick. He decided to rest on an empty crate for a while, going as limp as a rag doll, when he realized that he was in the port’s central plaza. This was apparently where the enemy had been piling their supplies, but now there was nothing left; the wide-open eastern gate indicated that the shipment had departed that morning and was already on its way.

It was a little past noon. Soldiers were patrolling the area, just to be safe; the port had been occupied by enemy forces mere moments ago, and there was no telling where they might be lurking now. Negligence was therefore forbidden, especially when their commander Altina was so conspicuous.

“Regis, it looks like their convoy’s already left.”

“...After such a flashy explosion, I can’t say I blame them.”

“I guess no one in their right mind would want to stick around after seeing that.”

“Right. Not to mention, Mercenary King Gilbert came to get them; they wouldn’t take any half-measures.”

“What!? Wasn’t he bound for the capital!?”

“...He apparently came here with a handful of his own troops. These supply ships were the Achilles’ heel of their entire operation, after all, which is why they entrusted their escort to their strongest. Nice work from Oswald Coulthard.”

From there, Regis immediately extracted information from their prisoners of war. Though not personally, of course. The look in the prisoners’ eyes was so terrible that Regis found himself more worried about their health than willing to interrogate them.

Altina clenched her fists. “I see... He’s the trident wielder who wounded

Latrielle. And he was *here*.”

“Err... I don’t think I have to tell you this, but please don’t run out looking to fight him.”

“I-I know that! But I definitely don’t plan on running away, should I ever see him!”

Her trusty blade was currently undergoing repairs so she was only equipped with a regular sword, and judging by their exchange during the nation’s anniversary, Latrielle was probably the better fighter. Seeing as that very same Latrielle had come out injured, any normal person would think that Altina’s chances of victory were terribly slim.

As a strategist, and taking the princess’s personality into account, Regis made a note on how essential it was to never confront Gilbert directly—not that he was planning on letting anyone attack their main camp. Altina was thankfully not a fool who would challenge the Mercenary King to a one-on-one duel, but if challenged, she wasn’t the type to back down. And even if she were, doing so would consequently lower troop morale.

“Hm... Mercenary King Gilbert, eh? I’ll have to think of something...” Regis mused aloud. “Ugh, my head hurts.”

“Well, if we’ve got no other options, I’ll just take him out myself,” Altina said proudly.

“Please don’t!”

“...Hey, hold on a second. Back during the naval battle... why *did* that ship explode?”

“Oh, you mean the Urathenos-class that we rammed into them? Why, because we loaded it full of gunpowder, of course. We filled the food and water hold, as well as the gun decks and corridors, with the gunpowder that we’d taken from the Poseidam. Then, we set up a contraption to ignite it. Well, not much of a contraption, really—it was simply a torch that would be knocked over onto a mountain of gunpowder pouches.”

“Did you set up the other ships like that, too?”

“Oh, no. If our enemy had chosen to continue the battle even after seeing that explosion, we’d have had to turn to something else.”

“You had *something else*, too!?”

“...If they were that determined to keep up the fight, they would have pursued us even if we fled the bay. Had that been the case, I would have made use of the cannons from the Poseidam that we’d set up along the coast. Setting their ships aflame with an oil-soaked rope was also an option, but oil doesn’t come cheap, so I’m glad we didn’t have to resort to that.”

“And you did all of that last night?”

“Oh goodness no. We took care of the Poseidam’s equipment yesterday morning, and I sent a messenger to prepare the oil right back when I got word of the western campaign, considering the worst-case scenario where the fleet was already in shambles when we arrived.”

“Wow.” Altina exhaled deeply, both impressed and concerned.

Regis began going into detail about where he had first read about each plan, and how they were depicted in their respective works. He had even paid close attention to cases where these strategies had been recorded as unsuccessful, attempting to work out the reasons behind each failure. It truly was a topic that he could go on and on about.

“...But since these techniques were all for naval battles, no matter how much I read, I really had to rely on my imagination. Reading them again should be a little more enjoyable now, at least.”

“You really are such a Regis,” Altina sighed, gazing out over the mountain range to the east. “So they’ve already taken off with their supplies. What are we going to do?”

“We’ll wait a bit, then meet up with the Fourth Army.”

“You mean with Jerome?”

“I had them hide in the mountains and watch the port. Had things not gone so well at sea, I considered having them launch an attack at night, waving the regiment’s flag to signal if they managed to take the port.”

That was the same plan as when they had occupied Fort Volks. Given how nearby the Fourth Army was stationed, they would probably be able to meet up with Jerome that same day.

“But seriously, how are we going to manage this? Even with the forces from Fort Letroisti, we only number around fourteen thousand. That might be considerably more than the enemy’s new supply unit of only five thousand, but they have the latest guns and cannons.”

“...So I’ve heard.”

“And if such a large supply unit reaches its destination, we might not be able to protect the capital...”

“That sounds about right. But as long as they don’t make it, we should be fine.”

“Haaah...” Altina let out a deep sigh, which, considering her usual energetic nature, was quite a rare sight to behold.

“Did you not get enough sleep last night?”

“That wasn’t a yawn, Regis! I’m so anxious right now that I don’t even know what to do with myself! With everything going on, I can’t just sit here doing nothing! Were it up to me, we’d be chasing down the enemy convoy already!”

“...You should probably wait until after we’ve reunited with Sir Jerome for that.”

“And while I’m being so impatient, look at you! You always look so... so nonchalant, Regis! You always say, ‘Oh, it’ll be all right!’” Altina ranted, dramatically swinging her arms around like a child throwing a tantrum.

Regis tried to alleviate the tension with a light chuckle, but as Altina’s scowl deepened, he was forced to give a proper response. “It’s not like I’ll always say that everything is going to be all right. There are plenty of things I don’t know, and even more that I can’t do anything about. But this time, things *will* be all right. Assuming they departed with the supplies just before noon, there’s a perfect open plain that we can use to— Hm?”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sudden arrival of the adjutant,

Sparke. For some reason, he had quite a refreshing smile on his face.

“Finally found you, Admiral!”

“Err... I’m not the admiral proxy anymore.”

“Oh, my apologies! Strategist, then!” Sparke corrected himself, punctuating his words with a respectful salute.

Regis returned the salute merely for appearance’s sake, though decided to remain seated on his crate since he was still feeling somewhat seasick. “So, did you need something?” he asked.

“Admiral Bertram came to!”

“Oh! That’s—”

“Wow! That’s great news!” Altina exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

Regis was just as pleased, offering the adjutant a smile and a warm nod. “So what’s his condition like?”

“He seems a lot more clearheaded. I gave him a report on everything that happened just a moment ago, and he said that he would love to personally offer you his thanks if you were still around.”

“I see. I suppose I also need to thank him for letting me use his fleet. Mn? Ah, but it looks like that will have to wait.”

“Oh!” Altina turned to the east where a cloud of dust had almost completely obscured the road, kicked up by a group of approaching horses. It had only been a few days since their last reunion, but seeing them again felt almost nostalgic.

It was the Fourth Army’s Black Knight Brigade—an order of knights led by the hero Jerome.

Sparke gave Regis an understanding nod, albeit looking a little disappointed. “You seem to be busy... I’ll pass the message on to the admiral.”

“That would be much appreciated. ‘Thank you for letting me use your fleet, and please take care.’ Could you tell him that for me?”

“*À vos ordres!*” Sparke replied, saluting once more.

This time, Regis stood and properly returned the gesture, before extending the hand he had pressed against his heart. “And thank you. It’s because of you that a novice like me was able to command the fleet in the first place.”



Sparke happily shook his hand. “Perish the thought! You were one of the best admirals I’ve ever had the pleasure of serving! I can only hope that, with enough hard work, I’ll be able to put together such a godly plan myself one day!”

“Ha... Haha...”

“Well, that’s because Regis is a *wizard*, you know!” Altina teasingly giggled.

“Wait. Alt—”

A smile instantly spread across Sparke’s face. “I knew it! What else could that have been but magic!?”

“No, that’s... I simply took inspiration from a few books, and—”

“You must be quite the avid reader. If you don’t mind, are there any particular books that you would recommend I study up on?”

Regis mulled over the adjutant’s question for a moment. He had no problem reciting information from the books he had read, so much so that he could go on for hours. But putting his own thoughts and opinions into words was a much harder—and much more embarrassing—task. He had no choice but to power through these feelings, though; not only Sparke, but Altina was also waiting to hear what he had to say.

“Hm... I suppose any books would do, so long as you can find what’s interesting about them,” Regis eventually responded, awkwardly scratching his head. “There aren’t actually too many dull ones out there, in my opinion. Though I must admit, there are times where their intrigue can be hard to find.”



On the second day of June in the Imperial Year 851, the Western Liberation Fleet led by Admiral Proxy Regis d’Aurick managed to successfully liberate Port Ciennbourg. Upon their arrival, however, they learned that the occupying enemy forces had already unloaded over half of their supplies, which were now *en route* to the front lines. If these reached Oswald, they would put the capital in quite the predicament.

Regis and Altina reunited with the Empire’s Fourth Army. It appeared that

several days of rest had at least somewhat revitalized its soldiers, who had been exhausted from the long journey. Based on the reports, with the soldiers of the Beilschmidt border regiment, those stationed at Fort Letroisti, and the latecomers combined, their forces now totaled sixteen thousand.

At the center of such a large army, Clarisse stepped out of the white carriage that Regis had lent to her. She was as silent as a doll, no doubt because there were others watching her. But when her and Regis's eyes met, for the briefest moment, the gentle smile from that memorable night crept onto her face. Her pale lips moved ever so slightly, seeming to mouth the words, "Welcome back."

Just as Regis and Altina were about to head toward her, a knight in majestic black clothing appeared on an equally jet-black warhorse. "Oi, Regis!"

"...Sir Jerome," Regis replied, having to crane his neck to see him.

"Ah, Jerome! Where's my horse!? I'm ready to go anytime!" Altina declared.

"Hmph. Sounds like capturing the port wasn't enough to put an end to things. What happened?"

"Yes, about that..." Regis began, lowering his head. "It seems the enemy managed to unload a substantial amount of their supplies yesterday."

Taking out the transport ships had hopefully removed the threat of any further supplies coming in, but they still needed to do something about the provisions that were already headed for the war front.

Jerome's expression turned even grimmer than usual. "Before we got here, Regis, you said it'd be impossible for us to beat their ten-thousand-strong supply unit."

"I did say that..."

"But now that very same supply unit is headed for the capital with ammunition in tow. How are you gonna fix this?"

"...Well, we have to do *something*. There is one idea that comes to mind."

"Oh, really!? Another plan!? Go on, then!" Jerome exclaimed, placing a hand on his sword. "And while you're at it, you can explain why you bothered with this whole sea operation when this was obviously what was going to happen!"

Regis could feel the cold sweat on his back. *He's not going to accept a half-baked response.*

"...Taking out their ground troops would have been a temporary solution. They could have simply delivered their next shipment to another port, and not even our horses would have been able to keep up."

"You mean this was all an excuse to focus on taking down their ships? You were lying when you said we wouldn't be able to beat them on land?"

"I-I wouldn't put it like *that*, though I suppose you're not necessarily wrong... But had I made it clear from the get-go that we were capable of defeating their ground units, and that their supplies would eventually be headed for the capital either way, then my proposal to instead sever their sea routes would have seemed irresolute at best. Who would have agreed to that?"

The Belgarian Navy had already lost to High Britannia's transport vessels once before, so had Regis told the truth—that challenging the enemy on land was indeed a viable option—then perhaps Latrielle would have ordered him to prioritize that approach instead.

Altina frowned. "Maybe you're right, Regis. Had you told me this before the naval battle, I probably would have agreed that we should challenge them on land, rather than out at sea where we're at a clear disadvantage." But even then, she had enough faith in her tactician that she knew she would have likely supported his plan regardless.

Jerome nodded. "So be it, then. Can't say this is the first time you've deceived me!"

"...I-I'm really not a liar."

"Hah!" Jerome scoffed, his horse braying along with him.

Unfortunately, even Altina seemed to be having doubts. "He's... not a liar... right...?" she muttered to herself.

Regis was getting teary-eyed. "I can't believe it. I simply took the best measures I could... Why am I being treated like this?"

At that, Jerome brought the conversation back on track. "So, the enemy has

five thousand of the latest firearms? And the path to the capital is clear enough that they could use the cannons from their shipment, too.”

“...They also have Mercenary King Gilbert at their disposal.”

“Oho!” At the mention of the famed mercenary, said to be the strongest in the entire continent, a broad smile spread across Jerome’s face. Regis struggled to understand why.

“I already know how to deal with their guns, and the Mercenary King didn’t bring too many of his own men, so we should be okay. It’s just...”

“What?”

“Is something bothering you, Regis?”

Jerome and Altina spoke up in turn, waiting on Regis’s response with bated breath.

Regis looked to the east. “This is taking longer than anticipated... so I’m a little worried about what’s happening back in the capital.”

Something had seemed noticeably off about Latrielle’s behavior during their meeting atop Le Lucé, and while Regis had forced himself to ignore it, his concerns were quickly starting to resurface.

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Cuirassé

Mankind had been using sail-affixed rafts to fish since before the development of the written word, making it impossible to pinpoint when the invention actually came to be, and by the time Belgaria was first established on the western part of the continent, there were already ships that could navigate the wide-open seas.

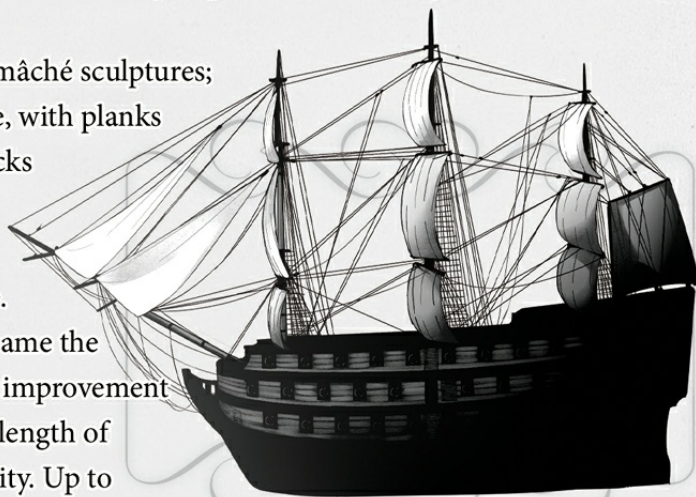
During this period, ships were made like papier-mâché sculptures; a loose framework of beams formed the general shape, with planks lined to span the gaps between them. The smaller cracks between these planks were then sealed with a mix of resin, lime, and hemp. Ships such as these could sometimes break when struck by a large enough wave.

Around five hundred years before Regis set sail, came the propagation of a certain innovation from the East: an improvement on the keel—a sturdy lateral board that ran along the length of the hull—that exponentially increased a ship's durability. Up to that point, the maximum length that a ship could be before it inevitably fell apart was fifty meters, but this allowed them to span over a hundred.

It wasn't just this new keel; the East also brought knowledge of black powder, the fundamental component of the cannon. Before this, naval warfare was primarily composed of one ship brushing up beside another for their men to board and engage in close-quarters combat. Almost every ship was fitted with a ram to smack into enemy vessels, and, in those days, Belgaria was undefeated.

Once the production and performance of cannons had advanced to the stage that they could be viably used aboard ships, however, an enemy could be capsized before they even had a chance to close in. From this point onward, the focus of predominant strategies shifted from close-quarters combat to artillery exchanges.

Initially, cannons were only lined above the deck. These were crude battles during which ships of various sizes and speeds would fire wildly as they drew nearer and nearer to one another, crossing and weaving until the naval battlefield was so disjointed that it became hard to distinguish friend from foe. High Britannia, an island nation that used its tea importation network to build more ships than its competitors, came up with a tactic known as the "line of battle": ships that possessed the same speed and firepower would sail together in a line, firing the cannons on their broadsides in coordinated bursts. This development took place two hundred years before Regis's time, and the strategy proved so effective that warships were soon improved to become more than just regular ships with cannons placed on their upper decks. Belgaria and its neighbors were quick to mass-produce similar technology, bringing the world into the age of the battleship.



During this time, had High Britannia put a seventy-four-gun ship into production, Belgaria would have immediately retaliated with an eighty-gun model; it was a full-on arms race to see who could construct the largest ship with the most cannons. In compliance with the military's reckless demands, there were ships made that would simply capsize were all their cannons to be fired at the same time.

Soins Médicaux

In the year 851, Belgaria's medical technology surpassed that of its neighboring countries by a sizable margin. Among the smaller nations were some who still believed that illness was the work of the devil, and that it could thus be treated through prayer. There were others who carried out questionable practices such as submerging the body up to the neck in water to treat a fever, or sealing open wounds with poisonous herbs. During this time, the measures taken against ailments were largely religious or traditional.

Amputating aching limbs was seen as an effective means of treatment, and the ones called in to perform such procedures were barbers—the fine gentlemen considered most proficient in the use of sharp blades. There was no concept of anesthetic, nor did they think to disinfect their implements with alcohol or by heating them.

The Empire, meanwhile, recognized doctors as a legitimate profession, and while there was still no distinction between surgical and medicinal practitioners, they employed procedures that proved immensely more effective than prayer.

This isn't to say that their medicine wasn't rudimentary by modern standards, however. For one, the opium commonly used as an anesthetic was known to cause addiction. The mortality rate of a blood transfusion was also concerningly high due to the frequent use of goat's blood, the absence of any means to prevent coagulation, and the fact that blood types were not yet common knowledge.

While microscopes had shown the existence of germs, no one understood that these microbial organisms were the cause of disease. That said, smallpox, which had plagued mankind since its origination, was already on the road to eradication through the successful development of a vaccine, even though doctors did not yet understand the disease itself.

Battle wounds, particularly those inflicted by swords and bows, were still treated as they always had been. A clean white cloth was first pressed against the injury to stop the bleeding, after which the wound would be thoroughly washed. Any parts that were found to be rotten would be sliced off, and then this process was repeated. Ultimately, such treatments relied on natural recovery, with the chance of survival depending on one's own vitality.

Since military doctors were usually tasked with looking after a considerable number of patients at once, they were trained to prioritize them based on urgency—a process known as triaging. This was done by gauging the severity of an injury or, in many cases, simply determining those who were too near death to treat. Records indicate that doctors would determine who was beyond saving based on where the wound was located and the color of the liquid seeping out.

More often than not, serious injury resulted in death, and those who did manage to survive commonly suffered from long-term sequelae. Only a small handful would ever make a full recovery. In war, casualties were inevitable, and there was no convenient healing magic nor any magic potions to bring back the dead.

.....

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess VI*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

This volume was the promised naval battle. That said, I now understand why it's so hard to depict ships and robots in light novels—it's tricky to explain their state in clear terms. I've tried my best to make it not so tedious to read, but I had a hard time trying to balance that alongside the quickly developing plot.

Had I just made the Belgian troops board the enemy ship and allowed Altina to draw her sword, I could have easily created a pretty exciting scenario, but... since the line of battle tactic is specifically designed to prevent close-quarters combat, I'm going to respect that. I can only hope you enjoyed it.

I'm not sure whether this is any compensation, but in the next volume, Regis's forces finally clash with an army equipped with the latest firearms. It's a head-on battle with Mercenary King Gilbert!

On top of that, we finally get to see Latrielle go up against Oswald. Well, I hope we do, at least. Sorry, I've been writing without paying attention to page count lately, but I'll see how far we can get. Please stick around for the next volume!

This might be shameless advertising, but the first volume of *Koma Hibiki* (published in *Dragon Age*) is out. It's a different kind of story where high school girls play shogi.

My thanks—

To himesuz-sensei. The cover art for this volume is better than ever before. Once again, thank you for all the wonderful illustrations.

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama from Afterglow. You even did the map for me this time! Thank you for always making the books look so cool.

To my presiding editor, Wada-sama. Thanks to you, we finally have a manga adaptation. You have my utmost gratitude.

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial division, everyone involved in the production, and to my family and friends who support me.

And to you, dear reader, for reading this far! Thank you so much.

Yukiya Murasaki

ALTINA IV

😊
hime

Thank you
so much for
reading volume 6.

This time,
the story was
heavily focused on
the sea, so I've
taken the liberty of
drawing Altina in
a swimsuit.

Murasaki-san,
Wada-san, I had
a Blast drawing
this time around.

Thank you.





“Regis...”

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

“Me!? Err...
The commander
I serve?”

“Who is
she to you?”

Seaside Lass
Narissa

“Fufufu...
If the princess
were to see us now,
do you think she’d
misunderstand?”

“Misunderstand what?”

At that, Clarisse placed a hand over Regis’s eyes.
Her touch was soft, pleasantly cool,
and carried a gentle fragrance.

“Very well, then.
I’ll read to you.
That should at least
give your body and
eyes some rest.”

Whimsical Maid
Clarisse





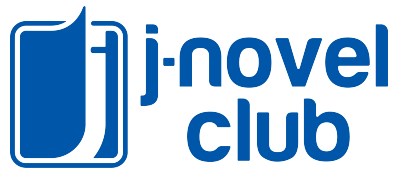
“Aren’t
we going
to get hit
like this?”

“...Most
likely.”

“Admiral,
the enemy turns
starboard!”

No sooner had Regis muttered
than the enemy ships’ port sides
were swallowed in black smoke.





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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 6

by Yukiya Murasaki

Translated by Roy Nukia Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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